THE MAN IN BLACK

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
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THE MAN IN BLACK

"'IF YOU WANT ME TO—DRAW HER HOROSCOPE,' THE ASTROLOGER REPLIED" (*p.* 89).

The Man in Black

BY

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

Author of "A Gentleman of France" "The Story of Francis Cludde" etc.

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Illustrated by

WAL. PAGET AND H. M. PAGET

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THE MAN IN BLACK.

CHAPTER I.

THE FAIR AT FÉCAMP.

"I am Jehan de Bault, Seigneur of—I know not where, and Lord of seventeen lordships in the County of—I forget the name, of a most noble and puissant family, possessing the High Justice, the Middle, and the Low. In my veins runs the blood of Roland, and of my forefathers were three marshals of France. I stand here, the——"

It was the eve of All Saints, and the famous autumn horse-fair was in progress at Fécamp—Fécamp on the Normandy coast, the town between the cliffs, which Boisrosé, in the year '93, snatched for the Great King by a feat of audacity unparalleled in war. This only by the way, however; and that a

worthy deed may not die. For at the date of this fair of which we write, the last day of October, 1637, stout Captain Boisrosé, whom Sully made for his daring Lieutenant-General of the Ordnance, had long ceased to ruffle it; the Great King had lain in his grave a score of years or more; and though Sully, duke and peer and marshal, still lived, an aged, formal man, in his château of Villebon by Chartres, all France, crouching under the iron hand of the Cardinal, looked other ways.

The great snarled, biting at the hem of the red soutane. But that the mean and Jacques Bonhomme, the merchant and the trader, flourished under his rule, Fécamp was as good evidence this day as man could desire. Even old burghers who remembered Charles the Ninth, and the first glass windows ever seen in Fécamp outside the Abbey, could not say when the price of horses had been higher or the town more full. All day, and almost all night, the clatter of hoofs and babble of bargains filled the narrow streets; while hucksters' cries and drunkards' oaths, with all raucous sounds, went up to heaven

like the smoke from a furnace. The *Chariot d'Or* and the *Holy Fig*, haunts of those who came to buy, fairly hummed with guests, with nobles of the province and gay sparks from Rouen, army contractors from the Rhine, and dealers from the south. As for the *Dame Belle* and the *Green Man*, houses that lower down the street had food and forage for those who came to sell, they strewed their yards a foot deep with straw, and saying to all alike, "Voilà, monsieur!" charged the full price of a bed.

Beyond the streets it was the same. Strings of horses and ponies, with an army of grooms and chaunters, touts and cutpurses, camped on every piece of level ground, while the steeper slopes and hill-sides swarmed with troupes more picturesque, if less useful. For these were the pitches of the stilt-walkers and funambulists, the morris dancers and hobby-horses: in a word, of an innumerable company of quacks, jugglers, poor students, and pasteboard giants, come together for the delectation of the gaping Normans, and all under the sway and authority of the Chevalier

du Guet, in whose honour two gibbets, each bearing a creaking corpse, rose on convenient situations overlooking the fair. For brawlers and minor sinners a pillory and a whipping-post stood handy by the landward gate, and from time to time, when a lusty vagrant or a handsome wench was dragged up for punishment, outvied in attraction all the professional shows.

Of these, one that seemed as successful as any in catching and chaining the fancy of the shifting crowd consisted of three persons —a man, a boy, and an ape—who had chosen for their pitch a portion of the steep hill-side overhanging the road. High up in this they had driven home an iron peg, and stretching a cord from this to the top of a tree which stood on the farther edge of the highway, had improvised a tight-rope at once simple and effective. All day, as the changing throng passed to and fro below, the monkey and the boy might be seen twisting and turning and posturing on this giddy eminence, while the man, fantastically dressed in an iron cap a world too big for him, and a

back- and breast-piece which ill-matched his stained crimson jacket and taffety breeches, stood beating a drum at the foot of the tree, or now and again stepped forward to receive in a ladle the sous and eggs and comfits that rewarded the show.

He was a lean, middle-sized man, with squinting eyes and a crafty mouth. Unaided he might have made his living by cutting purses. But he had the wit to do by others what he could not do himself, and the luck to have that in his company which pleased all comers; for while the clowns gazed saucer-eyed at the uncouth form and hideous grimaces of the ape, the thin cheeks and panting lips of the boy touched the hearts of their mistresses, and drew from them many a cake and fairing. Still, with a crowd change is everything; and in the contest of attractions, where there was here a flying dragon and there a dancing bear, and in a place apart the mystery of Joseph of Arimathæa and the Sacred Fig-tree was being performed by a company that had played before the King in Paris—and when, besides all these

raree shows, a score of quacks and wizards and collar-grinners with lungs of brass, were advertising themselves amid indescribable clanging of drums and squeaking of trumpets, it was not to be expected that a boy and a monkey could always hold the first place. An hour before sunset the ladle began to come home empty. The crowd grew thin. Gargantuan roars of laughter from the players' booth drew off some who lingered. It seemed as if the trio's run of success was at an end; and that, for all the profit they were still likely to make, they might pack up and be off to bed.

But Master Crafty Eyes knew better. Before his popularity quite flickered out he produced a folding stool. Setting it at the foot of the tree with a grand air, which of itself was enough to arrest the waverers, he solemnly covered it with a red cloth. This done, he folded his arms, looked very sternly two ways at once, and raising his hand without glancing upwards, cried, "Tenez! His Excellency the Seigneur de Bault will have the kindness to descend."

The little handful of gapers laughed, and the laugh added to their number. But the boy, to whom the words were addressed, did not move. He sat idly on the rope, swaying to and fro, and looked out straight before him, with a set face, and a mutinous glare in his eyes. He appeared to be about twelve years old. He was lithe-limbed, and burned brown by the sun, with a mass of black hair and, strange to say, blue eyes. The ape sat cheek by jowl with him; and even at the sound of the master's voice turned to him humanly, as if to say, "You had better go."

Still he did not move. "Tenez!" Master Crafty Eyes cried again, and more sharply. "His Excellency the Seigneur de Bault will have the kindness to descend, and narrate his history. *Écoutez! Écoutez! mesdames et messieurs!* It will repay you."

This time the boy, frowning and stubborn, looked down from his perch. He seemed to be measuring the distance, and calculating whether his height from the ground would save him from the whip. Apparently he came to the conclusion it would not, for on

the man crying "*Vitement! Vitement!*" and flinging a grim look upwards, he began to descend slowly, a sullen reluctance manifest in all his movements.

On reaching the ground, he made his way through the audience—which had increased to above a score—and climbed heavily on the stool, where he stood looking round him with a dark shamefacedness, surprising in one who was part of a show, and had been posturing all day long for the public amusement. The women, quick to espy the hollows in his cheeks, and the great wheal that seamed his neck, and quick also to admire the straightness of his limbs and the light pose of his head, regarded him pitifully. The men only stared; smoking had not yet come in at Fécamp, so they munched cakes and gazed by turns.

"Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!" cried the man with the drum. "Listen to the remarkable, lamentable, and veritable history of the Seigneur de Bault, now before you! Oyez!"

The boy cast a look round, but there was no escape. So, sullenly, and in a sing-song

tone—through which, nevertheless, some note of dignity, some strange echo of power and authority, that gave the recital its bizarre charm and made it what it was, would continually force itself—he began with the words at the head of this chapter:—

"I am Jehan de Bault, Seigneur of—I know not where, and Lord of seventeen lordships in the County of—I forget the name, of a most noble and puissant family, possessing the High Justice, the Middle, and the Low. In my veins runs the blood of Roland, and of my forefathers were three marshals of France. I stand here, the last of my race; in token whereof may God preserve my mother, the King, France, and this Province! I was stolen by gypsies at the age of five, and carried off and sold by my father's steward, as Joseph was by his brethren, and I appeal to—I appeal to—all good subjects of France to—help me to——"

"My rights!" interjected Crafty Eyes, with a savage glance.

"My rights," the boy whispered, lowering his head.

The drum-man came forward briskly. "Just so, ladies and gentlemen," he cried with wonderful glibness. "And seldom as it is that you have before you the representative of one of our most noble and ancient families a-begging your help, seldom as that remarkable, lamentable, and veritable sight is to be seen in Fécamp, sure I am that you will respond willingly, generously, and to the point, my lord, ladies and gentlemen!" And with this, and a far grander air than when it had been merely an affair of a boy and an ape, the knave carried round his ladle, doffing his cap to each who contributed, and saying politely, "The Sieur de Bault thanks you, sir. The Sieur de Bault is your servant, madam."

There was something so novel in the whole business, something so odd and inexplicably touching in the boy's words and manner, that with all the appearance of a barefaced trick, appealing only to the most ignorant, the thing wrought on the crowd: as doubtless it had wrought on a hundred crowds before. The first man to whom the ladle came

grinned sheepishly and gave against his will; and his fellows throughout maintained a position of reserve, shrugging their shoulders and looking wisdom. But a dozen women became believers at once, and despite the blare and flare of rival dragons and Moriscoes and the surrounding din and hubbub, the ladle came back full of deniers and sous.

The showman was counting his gains into his pouch, when a silver franc spun through the air and fell at his feet, and at the same time a harsh voice cried, "Here, you, sirrah! A word with you."

Master Crafty Eyes looked up, and doffing his cap humbly—for the voice was a voice of authority—went cringing to the speaker. This was an elderly man, well mounted, who had reined up his horse on the skirts of the crowd as the boy began his harangue. He had a plain soldier's face, with grey moustachios and a small, pointed grey beard, and he seemed to be a person of rank on his way out of the town; for he had two or three armed servants behind him, of whom one carried a valise on his crupper.

"What is your will, noble sir?" the showman whined, standing bare-headed at his stirrup and looking up at him.

"Who taught the lad that rubbish?" the horseman asked sternly.

"No one, my lord. It is the truth."

"Then bring him here, liar!" was the answer.

The showman obeyed, not very willingly, dragging the boy off the stool, and jerking him through the crowd. The stranger looked down at the child for a moment in silence. Then he said sharply, "Hark ye, tell me the truth, boy. What is your name?"

The lad stood straight up, and answered without hesitation, "Jehan de Bault."

"Of nowhere in the County of No Name," the stranger gibed gravely. "Of a noble and puissant family—and the rest. All that is true, I suppose?"

A flicker as of hope gleamed in the boy's eyes. His cheek reddened. He raised his hand to the horse's shoulder, and answered in a voice which trembled a little, "It is true."

"THE SHOWMAN WAS COUNTING HIS GAINS INTO HIS POUCH" (*p.* 11).

"Where is Bault?" the stranger asked grimly.

The lad looked puzzled and disappointed. His lip trembled, his colour fled again. He glanced here and there, and finally shook his head. "I do not know," he said faintly.

"Nor do I," the horseman replied, striking his long brown boot with his riding-switch to give emphasis to the words, and looking sternly round. "Nor do I. And what is more, you may take it from me that there is no family of that name in France! And once more you may take this from me too. I am the Vicomte de Bresly, and I have a government in Guienne. Play this game in my county, and I will have you both whipped for common cheats, and you, Master Drummer, branded as well! Bear it in mind, sirrah; and when you perform, give Perigord a wide berth. That is all."

He struck his horse at the last word, and rode off; sitting, like an old soldier, so straight in his saddle that he did not see what happened behind him, or that the boy sprang forward with a hasty cry, and would,

but for the showman's grasp, have followed him. He rode away, unheeding and without looking back; and the boy, after a brief passionate struggle with his master, collapsed.

"You limb!" the man with the drum cried, as he shook him. "What bee has stung you? You won't be quiet, eh? Then take that! and that!" and he struck the child brutally in the face—twice.

Some cried shame and some laughed. But it was nobody's business, and there were a hundred delights within sight. What was one little boy, or a blow more or less, amid the whirl and tumult of the fair? A score of yards away a dancing girl, a very Peri—or so she seemed by the light of four tallow candles—was pirouetting on a rickety platform. Almost rubbing elbows with her was a philosopher, who had conquered all the secrets of Nature except cleanliness, and was prepared to sell infallible love-philtres and the potion of perpetual youth—for four farthings! And beyond these stretched a vista of wonders and prodigies, all vocal, not to say deafening. So one by one, with a

shrug or a sneer, the onlookers melted away, until only our trio remained : Master Crafty Eyes counting his gains, the boy sobbing against the bank on which he had thrown himself, and the monkey gibbering and chattering overhead—a dark shapeless object on an invisible rope. For night was falling : where the fun of the fair was not were gloom and a rising wind, lurking cutpurses, and waste land.

The showman seemed to feel this, for having counted his takings, he kicked up the boy and began to pack up. He had nearly finished, and was stooping over the coil of rope, securing the end, when a touch on his shoulder caused him to jump a yard. A tall man wrapped in a cloak, who had come up unseen, stood at his elbow.

"Well!" the showman cried, striving to hide his alarm under an appearance of bluster. "And what may you want?"

"A word with you," the unknown answered.

The voice was so cold and passionless it gave Crafty Eyes a turn. "Diable!" he

muttered, striving to pierce the darkness and see what the other was like. But he could not; so as to shake off the impression, he asked, with a sneer, "You are not a vicomte, are you?"

"No," the stranger replied gravely, "I am not."

"Nor the governor of a county?"

"No."

"Then you may speak!" rejoined the showman grandly.

"Not here," the cloaked man answered. "I must see you alone."

"Then you will have to come home with me, and wait until I have put up the boy," the other said. "I am not going to lose him for you or anyone. And for a penny he'd be off! Does it suit you? You may take it or leave it."

The unknown, whose features were completely masked by the dusk, nodded assent, and without more ado the four turned their faces towards the streets; the boy carrying the monkey, and the two men following close on his heels. Whenever they passed before

a lighted booth the showman strove to learn something of his companion's appearance but the latter wore his cloak so high about his face, and was so well served by a wide-flapped hat which almost met it, that curiosity was completely baffled ; and they reached the low inn where the showman rented a corner of the stable without that cunning gentleman being a jot the wiser for his pains.

It was a vile, evil-smelling place they entered, divided into six or eight stalls by wooden partitions reaching half-way to the tiles. A horn lantern hung at each end filled it with yellow lights and deep shadows. A pony raised its head and whinnied as the men entered, but most of the stalls were empty, or tenanted only by drunken clowns sleeping in the straw.

"You cannot lock him in here," said the stranger, looking round him.

The showman grunted. "Cannot I?" he said. "There are tricks in all trades, master. I reckon I can—with this!" And producing from somewhere about him a thin steel chain, he held it before the other's face.

"That is my lock and door," he said triumphantly.

"It won't hold him long," the other answered impassively. "The fifth link from the end is worn through now."

"You have sharp eyes!" the showman exclaimed, with reluctant admiration. "But it will hold a bit yet. I fasten him in yonder corner. Do you wait here, and I will come back to you."

He was not long about it. When he returned he led the stranger into the farthest of the stalls, which, as well as that next to it, was empty. "We can talk here," he said bluntly. "At any rate, I have no better place. The house is full. Now, what is it?"

"I want that boy," the tall man answered.

The showman laughed—stopped laughing—laughed again. "I dare say you do," he said derisively. "There is not a better or a pluckier boy on the rope out of Paris. And for patter? There is nothing on the road like the bit he did this afternoon, nor a bit that pays as well."

"Who taught it him?" the stranger asked.

"I did."

"That is a lie," the other answered in a perfectly unmoved tone. "If you like I will tell you what you did. You taught him the latter half of the story. The other he knew before: down to the word 'province.'"

The showman gasped. "Diable!" he muttered. "Who told you?"

"Never mind. You bought the boy. From whom?"

"From some gypsies at the great fair of Beaucaire," the showman answered sullenly.

"Who is he?"

Crafty Eyes laughed dryly. "If I knew I should not be padding the hoof," he said. "Or, again, he may be nobody, and the tale patter. You have heard as much as I have. What do you think?"

"I think I shall find out when I have bought the boy," the stranger answered coolly. "What will you take for him?"

The showman gasped again. "You come to the point," he said.

"It is my custom. What is his price?"

The showman's imagination had never soared beyond nor his ears ever heard of a larger sum than a thousand crowns. He mentioned it trembling. There might be such a sum in the world.

"A thousand livres, if you like. Not a sou more," was the answer.

The nearer lantern threw a strong light on Crafty Eyes' face; but that was mere shadow beside the light of cupidity which sparkled in his eyes. He could get another boy; scores of boys. But a thousand livres! A thousand livres! "Tournois!" he said faintly. "Livres Tournois!" In his wildest moments of avarice he had never dreamed of possessing such a sum.

"No, Paris livres," the stranger answered coldly. "Paid to-morrow at the *Golden Chariot*. If you agree, you will deliver the boy to me there at noon, and receive the money."

The showman nodded, vanquished by the mere sound of the sum. Paris livres let it be. Danae did not more quickly succumb to the golden shower.

CHAPTER II.

SOLOMON NÔTREDAME.

A LITTLE later that night, at the hour which saw the showman pay his second visit to the street before the *Chariot d'Or*, there to stand gaping at the lighted windows, and peering into the courtyard in a kind of fascination—or perhaps to assure himself that the house would not fly away, and his golden hopes with it—the twelve-year-old boy, the basis of those hopes, awoke and stirred restlessly in the straw. He was cold, and the chain galled him. His face ached where the man had struck him. In the next stall two drunken men were fighting, and the place reeked with oaths and foulness. But none of these things were so novel as to keep the boy awake; and sighing and drawing the monkey nearer to him, he would in a moment have been asleep again if the moon, shining with great brightness through the little square aperture

above him, had not thrown its light directly on his head, and roused him more completely.

He sat up and gazed at it, and God knows what softening thoughts and pitiful recollections the beauty of the night brought into his mind; but presently he began to weep —not as a child cries, with noise and wailing, but in silence, as a man weeps. The monkey awoke and crept into his breast, but he hardly regarded it. The misery, the hopelessness, the slavery of his life, ignored from hour to hour, or borne at other times with a boy's nonchalance, filled his heart to bursting now. Crouching in his lair in the straw, he shook with agony. The tears welled up, and would not be restrained, until they hid the face of the sky and darkened even the moon's pure light.

Or was it his tears? He dashed them away and looked, and rose slowly to his feet; while the ape, clinging to his breast, began to mow and gibber. A black mass, which gradually resolved itself, as the boy's eyes cleared, into a man's hat and head, filled the aperture.

"Hush!" came from the head in a cautious whisper. "Come nearer. I will not hurt you. Do you wish to escape, lad?"

The boy clasped his hands in an ecstasy. "Yes, oh yes!" he murmured. The question chimed in so naturally with his thoughts, it scarcely surprised him.

"If you were loose, could you get through this window?" the man asked. He spoke cautiously, under his breath; but the noise in the next stall, to say nothing of a vile drinking song which was being chanted forth at the farther end of the stable, was such he might safely have shouted. "Yes? Then take this file. Rub at the fifth link from the end: the one that is nearly through. Do you understand, boy?"

"Yes, yes," Jehan cried again, groping in the straw for the tool, which had fallen at his feet. "I know."

"When you are loose, cover up the chain," continued the other in a slow biting tone. "Or lie on that part of it, and wait until morning. As soon as you see the first

gleam of light, climb out through the window. You will find me outside."

The boy would have uttered his trembling thanks. But lo! in a moment the aperture was clear again; the moon sailed unchanged through an unchanged sky; and all was as before. Save for the presence of the little bit of rough steel in his hand, he might have thought it a dream. But the file was there; it was there, and with a choking sob of hope and fear and excitement, he fell to work on the chain.

It was clumsy work he made of it in the dark. But the link was so much worn, a man might have wrenched it open, and the boy did not spare his fingers. The dispute next door covered the song of the file; and the smoky horn lantern which alone lighted that end of the stable had no effect in the dark corner where he lay. True, he had to work by feel, looking out all the while for his tyrant's coming; but the tool was good, and the fingers, hardened by many an hour of work on the rope, were strong and lithe. When the showman at last stumbled to his

place in the straw, the boy lay free—free and trembling.

All was not done, however. It seemed an hour before the man settled himself—an hour of agony and suspense to Jehan, feigning sleep; since at any moment his master might take it into his head to look into things. But Crafty Eyes had no suspicion. Having kicked the boy and heard the chain rattle, and so assured himself that he was there—so much caution he exercised every night, drunk or sober—he was satisfied; and by-and-by, when his imagination, heated by thoughts of wealth, permitted it, he fell asleep, and dreamed that he had married the Cardinal's cook-maid and ate collops on Sundays.

Even so, the night seemed endless to the boy, lying wakeful, with his eyes on the sky. Now he was hot, now cold. One moment the thought that the window might prove too strait for him threw him into a bath of perspiration; the next he shuddered at the possibility of re-capture, and saw himself dragged back and flayed by his brutal owner.

But a watched pot *does* boil, though slowly. The first streak of dawn came at last—as it does when the sky is darkest; and with it, even as the boy rose warily to his feet, the sound of a faint whistle outside the window.

A common mortal could no more have passed through that window without noise than an old man can make himself young again. But the boy did it. As he dropped to the ground outside he heard the whistle again. The air was still dark; but a score of paces away, beyond a low wall, he made out the form of a horseman, and went towards it.

It was the man in the cloak, who stooped and held out his hand. "Jump up behind me," he muttered.

The boy went to obey, but as he clasped the outstretched hand, it was suddenly withdrawn. "What is that? What have you got there?" the rider exclaimed, peering down at him.

"It is only Taras, the monkey," Jehan said timidly.

"Throw it away," the stranger answered.

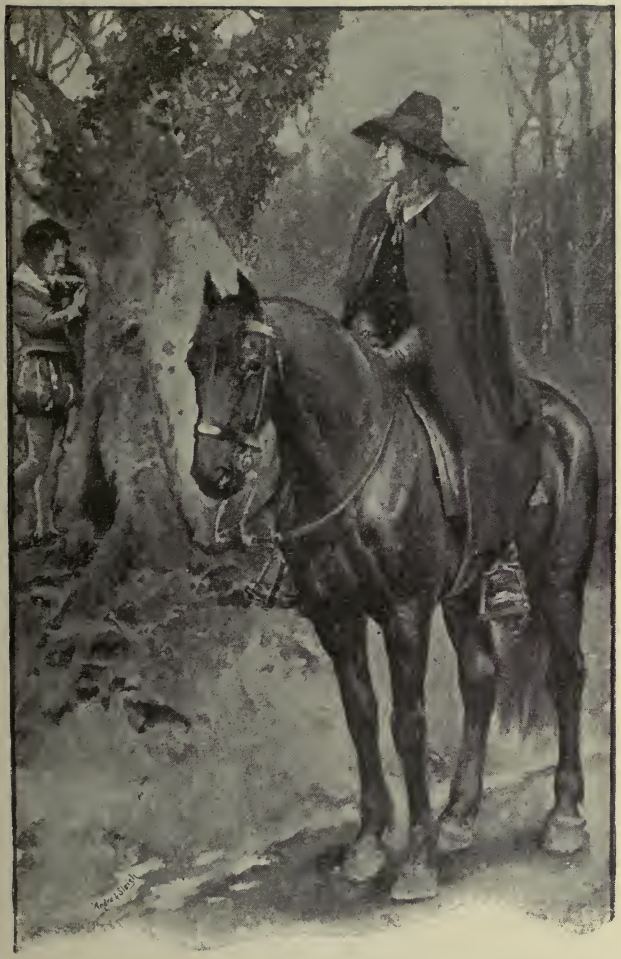
"Do you hear me?" he continued in a stern, composed tone. "Throw it away, I say."

The boy stood hesitating a moment; then, without a word, he turned and fled into the darkness the way he had come. The man on the horse swore under his breath, but he had no remedy; and before he could tell what to expect, the boy was at his side again. "I've put it through the window," Jehan explained breathlessly. "If I had left it here, the dogs and the boys would have killed it."

The man made no comment aloud, but jerked him roughly to the crupper; and bidding him hold fast, started the horse, which, setting off at an easy amble, quickly bore them out of Fécamp. As they passed through the fair-ground of yesterday—a shadowy, ghastly waste at this hour, peopled by wandering asses and packhorses, and a few lurking figures that leapt up out of the darkness, and ran after them whining for alms—the boy shivered and clung close to his protector. But he had no more than recognised the scene before they were out of

sight of it, and riding through the open fields. The grey dawn was spreading, the cocks at distant farms were crowing. The dim, misty countryside, the looming trees, the raw air, the chill that crept into his ill-covered bones—all these, which might have seemed to others wretched conditions enough, filled the boy with hope and gladness. For they meant freedom.

But presently, as they rode on, his thoughts took a fresh turn. They began to busy themselves, and fearfully, with the man before him, whose continued silence and cold reserve set a hundred wild ideas humming in his brain. What manner of man was he? Who was he? Why had he helped him? Jehan had heard of ogres and giants that decoyed children into forests and devoured them. He had listened to ballads of such adventures, sung at fairs and in the streets, a hundred times; now they came so strongly into his mind, and so grew upon him in this grim companionship, that by-and-by, seeing a wood before them through which the road ran, he shook with terror



"JEHAN WENT TREMBLING AND FOUND THE HOLE" (*p.* 33).

and gave himself up for lost. Sure enough, when they came to the wood, and had ridden a little way into it, the man, whose face he had never seen, stopped. "Get down," he said sternly.

Jehan obeyed, his teeth chattering, his legs quaking under him. He expected the man to produce a large carving-knife, or call some of his fellows out of the forest to share his repast. Instead, the stranger made a queer pass with his hands over his horse's neck, and bade the boy go to an old stump which stood by the way. "There is a hole in the farther side of it," he said. "Look in the hole."

Jehan went trembling and found the hole, and looked. "What do you see?" the rider asked.

"A piece of money," said Jehan.

"Bring it to me," the stranger answered gravely.

The boy took it—it was only a copper sou—and did as he was bidden. "Get up!" said the horseman curtly. Jehan obeyed, and they went on as before.

When they had ridden half-way through the forest, however, the stranger stopped again. "Get down," he said.

The boy obeyed, and was directed as on the former occasion—but not until the horseman had made the same strange gesture with his hands—to go to an old stump. This time he found a silver livre. He gave it to his master, and climbed again to his place, marvelling much.

A third time they stopped, on the farther verge of the forest. The same words passed, but this time the boy found a gold crown in the hole.

After that his mind no longer ran upon ogres and giants. Instead, another fancy almost as dreadful took possession of him. He remarked that everything the stranger wore was black: his cloak, his hat, his gauntlets. Even his long boots, which in those days were commonly made of untanned leather, were black. So was the furniture of the horse. Jehan noticed this as he mounted the third time; and connecting it with the marvellous springing up of money

where the man willed, began to be seized with panic, never doubting but that he had fallen into the hands of the devil. Likely enough, he would have dropped off at the first opportunity that offered, and fled for his life—or his soul, but he did not know much of that—if the stranger had not in the nick of time drawn a parcel of food from his saddle-bag. He gave some to Jehan. Even so, the boy, hungry as he was, did not dare to touch it until he was assured that his companion was really eating—eating, and not pretending. Then, with a great sigh of relief, he began to eat too. For he knew that the devil never ate!

After this they rode on in silence, until, about an hour before noon, they came to a small farm-steading standing by the road, half a league short of the sleepy old town of Yvetot, which Beranger was one day to celebrate. Here the magician—for such Jehan now took his companion to be—stopped. "Get down," he said.

The boy obeyed, and instinctively looked for a stump. But there was no stump, and

this time his master, after scanning his ragged garments as if to assure himself of his appearance, had a different order to give. "Go to that farm," he said. "Knock at the door, and say that Solomon Nôtredame de Paris requires two fowls. They will give them to you. Bring them to me."

The boy went wide-eyed, knocked, and gave his message. A woman, who opened the door, stretched out her hand, took up a couple of fowls that lay tied together on the hearth, and gave them to him without a word. He took them—he no longer wondered at anything—and carried them back to his master in the road.

"Now listen to me," said the latter, in his slow, cold tone. "Go into the town you see before you, and in the market-place you will find an inn with the sign of the *Three Pigeons*. Enter the yard and offer these fowls for sale, but ask a livre apiece for them, that they may not be bought. While offering them, make an excuse to go into the stable, where you will see a grey horse. Drop this white lump into the horse's manger when no

one is looking, and afterwards remain at the door of the yard. If you see me, do not speak to me. Do you understand ?"

Jehan said he did; but his new master made him repeat his orders from beginning to end before he let him go with the fowls and the white lump, which was about the size of a walnut, and looked like rock-salt.

About an hour later the landlord of the *Three Pigeons* at Yvetot heard a horseman stop at his door. He went out to meet him. Now, Yvetot is on the road to Havre and Harfleur; and though the former of these places was then in the making and the latter was dying fast, the landlord had had experience of many guests. But so strange a guest as the one he found awaiting him he thought he had never seen. In the first place, the gentleman was clad from top to toe in black; and though he had no servants behind him, he wore an air of as grave consequence as though he boasted six. In the next place, his face was so long, thin, and cadaverous that, but for a great black line of eyebrows that cut it in two and gave it a

very curious and sinister expression, people meeting him for the first time might have been tempted to laugh. Altogether, the landlord could not make him out; but he thought it safer to go out and hold his stirrup, and ask his pleasure.

"I shall dine here," the stranger answered gravely. As he dismounted his cloak fell open. The landlord observed with growing wonder that its black lining was sprinkled with cabalistic figures embroidered in white.

Introduced to the public room, which was over the great stone porch and happened to be empty, the traveller lost none of his singularity. He paused a little way within the door, and stood as if suddenly fallen into deep thought. The landlord, beginning to think him mad, ventured to recall him by asking what his honour would take.

"There is something amiss in this house," the stranger replied abruptly, turning his eyes on him.

"Amiss?" the host answered, faltering under his gaze, and wishing himself well

out of the room. "Not that I am aware of, your honour."

"There is no one ill?"

"No, your honour, certainly not."

"Nor deformed?"

"No."

"You are mistaken," the stranger answered firmly. "Know that I am Solomon, son to Cæsar, son to Michel Nôtredame of Paris, commonly called by the learned Nostradamus and the Transcendental, who read the future and rode the Great White Horse of Death. All things hidden are open to me."

The landlord only gaped, but his wife and a serving wench, who had come to the door out of curiosity, and were listening and staring with all their might, crossed themselves industriously. "I am here," the stranger continued, after a brief pause, "to construct the horoscope of His Eminence the Cardinal, of whom it has been predicted that he will die at Yvetot. But I find the conditions unpropitious. There is an adverse influence in this house."

The landlord scratched his head, and looked helplessly at his wife. But she was quite taken up with awe of the stranger, whose head nearly touched the ceiling of the low room; while his long, pale face seemed in the obscurity—for the day was dark—to be of an unearthly pallor.

"An adverse influence," the astrologer continued gravely. "What is more, I now see where it is. It is in the stable. You have a grey horse."

The landlord, somewhat astonished, said he had.

"You had. You have not now. The devil has it!" was the astounding answer.

"My grey horse?"

The stranger inclined his head.

"Nay, there you are wrong!" the host retorted briskly. "I'm hanged if he has! For I rode the horse this morning, and it went as well and quietly as ever in its life."

"Send and see," the tall man answered.

The serving girl, obeying a nod, went off reluctantly to the stable, while her master, casting a look of misliking at his guest,

walked uneasily to the window. In a moment the girl came back, her face white. "The grey is in a fit," she cried, keeping the whole width of the room between her and the stranger. "It is sweating and staggering."

The landlord, with an oath, ran off to see, and in a minute the appearance of an excited group in the square under the window showed that the thing was known. The traveller took no notice of this, however, nor of the curious and reverential glances which the womenfolk, huddled about the door of the room, cast at him. He walked up and down the room with his eyes lowered.

The landlord came back presently, his face black as thunder. "It has got the staggers," he said resentfully.

"It has got the devil," the stranger answered coldly. "I knew it was in the house when I entered. If you doubt me, I will prove it."

"Ay?" said the landlord stubbornly.

The man in black went to his saddle-bag,

which had been brought up and laid in a corner, and took out a shallow glass bowl, curiously embossed with a cross and some mystic symbols. "Go to the church there," he said, "and fill this with holy water."

The host took it unwillingly, and went on his strange errand. While he was away the astrologer opened the window, and looked out idly. When he saw the other returning, he gave the order "Lead out the horse."

There was a brief delay, but presently two stablemen, with a little posse of wondering attendants, partly urged and partly led out a handsome grey horse. The poor animal trembled and hung its head, but with some difficulty was brought under the window. Now and again a sharp spasm convulsed its limbs, and scattered the spectators right and left.

Solomon Nôtredame leaned out of the window. In his left hand he held the bowl, in his right a small brush. "If this beast is sick with any earthly sickness," he cried in a deep solemn voice, audible across the square, "or with such as earthly skill can cure, then

let this holy water do it no harm, but refresh it. But if it be possessed by the devil, and given up to the powers of darkness and to the enemy of man for ever and ever to do his will and pleasure, then let these drops burn and consume it as with fire. Amen! Amen!"

With the last word he sprinkled the horse. The effect was magical. The animal reared up, as if it had been furiously spurred, and plunged so violently that the men who held it were dragged this way and that. The crowd fled every way; but not so quickly but that a hundred eyes had seen the horse smoke where the water fell on it. Moreover, when they cautiously approached it, the hair in two or three places was found to be burned off!

The magician turned gravely from the window. "I wish to eat," he said.

None of the servants, however, would come into the room or serve him, and the landlord, trembling, set the board with his own hands and waited on him. Mine host had begun by doubting and suspecting, but,

simple man! his scepticism was not proof against the holy water trial and his wife's terror. By-and-by, with a sidelong glance at his guest, he faltered the question: What should he do with the horse?

The man in black looked solemn. "Whoever mounts it will die within the year," he said.

"I will shoot it," the landlord replied, shuddering.

"The devil will pass into one of the other horses," was the answer.

"Then," said the miserable innkeeper, "perhaps your honour would accept it?"

"God forbid!" the astrologer answered. And that frightened the other more than all the rest. "But if you can find at any time," the wizard continued, "a beggar-boy with black hair and blue eyes, who does not know his father's name, he may take the horse and break the spell. So I read the signs."

The landlord cried out that such a person was not to be met with in a lifetime. But before he had well finished his sentence a shrill voice called through the keyhole that

there was such a boy in the yard at that moment, offering poultry for sale.

"In God's name, then, give him the horse!" the stranger said. "Bid him take it to Rouen, and at every running water he comes to say a paternoster and sprinkle its tail. So he may escape, and you, too. I know no other way."

The trembling innkeeper said he would do that, and did it. And so, when the man in black rode into Rouen the next evening, he did not ride alone. He was attended at a respectful distance by a good-looking page clad in sable velvet, and mounted on a handsome grey horse.

CHAPTER III.

MAN AND WIFE.

It is a pleasant thing to be warmly clad and to lie softly, and at night to be in shelter and in the day to eat and drink. But all these things may be dearly bought, and so the boy Jehan de Bault soon found. He was no longer beaten, chained, or starved; he lay in a truckle bed instead of a stable; the work he had to do was of the lightest. But he paid for all in fears—in an ever-present, abiding, mastering fear of the man behind whom he rode: who never scolded, never rated, nor even struck him, but whose lightest word—and much more, his long silences—filled the lad with dread and awe unspeakable. Something sinister in the man's face, all found; but to Jehan, who never doubted his dark powers, and who shrank from his eye, and flinched at his voice, and cowered when he spoke, there

was a cold malevolence in the face, an evil knowledge, that made the boy's flesh creep and chained his soul with dread.

The astrologer saw this, and revelled in it, and went about to increase it after a fashion of his own. Hearing the boy, on an occasion when he had turned to him suddenly, ejaculate "*Oh, Dieu!*" he said, with a dreadful smile, "You should not say that! Do you know why?"

The boy's face grew a shade paler, but he did not speak.

"Ask me why! Say, 'Why not?'"

"Why not?" Jehan muttered. He would have given the world to avert his eyes, but he could not.

"Because you have sold yourself to the devil!" the other hissed. "Others may say it; you may not. What is the use? You have sold yourself—body, soul, and spirit. You came of your own accord, and climbed on the black horse. And now," he continued, in a tone which always compelled obedience, "answer my questions. What is your name?"

"Jehan de Bault," the boy whispered, shivering and shuddering.

"Louder!"

"Jehan de Bault."

"Repeat the story you told at the fair."

"I am Jehan de Bault, Seigneur of—I know not where, and Lord of seventeen lordships in the County of Perigord, of a most noble and puissant family, possessing the High Justice, the Middle, and the Low. In my veins runs the blood of Roland, and of my forefathers were three marshals of France. I stand here, the last of my race; in token whereof may God preserve my mother, the King, France, and this Province."

"Ha! In the County of Perigord!" the astrologer said, with a sudden lightening of his heavy brows. "You have remembered that?"

"Yes. I heard the word at Fécamp."

"And all that is true?"

"Yes."

"Who taught it you?"

"I do not know." The boy's face, in its straining, was painful to see.

"What is the first thing you can remember?"

"A house in a wood."

"Can you remember your father?"

"No."

"Your mother?"

"No—yes—I am not sure."

"Umph! Were you stolen by gypsies?"

"I do not know."

"Or sold by your father's steward?"

"I do not know."

"How long were you with the man from whom I took you?"

"I do not know."

"I do," the astrologer answered, in the same even tone in which he had put the questions. And the boy never doubted him. "Beware, therefore," the man in black continued, with a dreadful sidelong glance, "how you seek to deceive me! You can fall back now. I have done with you for the present."

I say "the boy never doubted him." This was not wonderful in an age of spells and *diablerie*, when the wisest allowed the reality of magic, and the learned and curious could

cite a hundred instances of its power. That La Brosse warned Henry the Great he would die in his coach, and that Thomassin read in the stars the very day, hour, and minute of the catastrophe, no man of that time questioned. That Michel Nôtredame promised a crown to each of Catherine de Medici's three sons, and that Sully's preceptor foretold in detail that Minister's career, were held to be facts as certain as that La Rivière cast the horoscope of the thirteenth Louis while the future monarch lay in his cradle. The men of the day believed that the Concini swayed her mistress by magic; that Wallenstein, the greatest soldier of his time, did nothing without his familiar; that Richelieu, the greatest statesman, had Joseph always at his elbow. In such an age it was not wonderful that a child should accept without question the claims of this man: who was accustomed to inspire fear in the many, and in the few that vague and subtle repulsion which we are wont to associate with the presence of evil.

Beyond Rouen, and between that city and Paris, the two companions found the road

well frequented. Of the passers, many stood to gaze at the traveller in black, and some drew to the farther side of the road as he went by. But none laughed or found anything ridiculous in his appearance; or if they did, it needed but a glance from his long, pale face to restore them to sobriety. At the inn at Rouen he was well received; at the *Grand Cerf* at Les Andelys, where he seemed to be known, he was welcomed with effusion. Though the house was full, a separate chamber was assigned to him, and supper prepared for him with the utmost speed.

Here, however, he was not destined to enjoy his privacy long. At the last moment, as he was sitting down to his meal, with the boy in attendance, a bustle was heard outside. The voice of someone rating the landlord in no measured terms became audible, the noise growing louder as the speaker mounted the stairs. Presently a hand was laid on the latch, the door was thrown open, and a gentleman strode into the room whose swaggering air and angry gestures showed that he was determined to make good his footing. A

lady, masked, and in a travelling habit, followed more quietly; and in the background could be seen three or four servants, together with the unfortunate landlord, who was very evidently divided between fear of his mysterious guest and the claims of the newcomers.

The astrologer rose slowly from his seat. His peculiar aspect, his stature and leanness and black garb, which never failed to impress strangers, took the intruder somewhat aback. He hesitated, and removing his hat, began to utter a tardy apology. "I crave your pardon, sir," he said ungraciously, "but we ride on after supper. We stay here only to eat, and they tell us there is no other chamber with even a degree of emptiness in it."

"You are welcome, M. de Vidoche," the man in black answered.

The intruder started and frowned. "You know my name," he said, with a sneer. "But there, I suppose it is your business to know these things."

"It is my business to know," the astrologer answered, unmoved. "Will not madame be seated?"

"THE ASTROLOGER ROSE SLOWLY FROM HIS SEAT" (*p.* 52).

The lady bowed, and taking off her mask with fingers which trembled a little, disclosed a fair, childish face, that would have been pretty, and even charming, but for an expression of nervousness which seemed habitual to it. She shrank from the astrologer's gaze, and, sitting down as far from him as the table permitted, pretended to busy herself in taking off her gloves. He was accustomed to be met in this way, and to see the timid quake before him; but it did not escape his notice that this lady shrank also at the sound of her husband's voice, and when he spoke, listened with the pitiful air of propitiation which may be seen in a whipped dog. She was pale, and by the side of her husband seemed to lack colour. He was a man of singularly handsome exterior, dark-haired and hard-eyed, with a high, fresh complexion, and a sneering lip. His dress was in the extreme of the fashion, his falling collar vandyked, and his breeches open below the knee, where they were met by wide-mouthed boots. A great plume of feathers set off his hat, and he carried a switch as well as a sword.

The astrologer read the story at a glance. "Madame is perhaps fatigued by the journey," he said politely.

"Madame is very easily fatigued," the husband replied, throwing down his hat with a savage sneer, "especially when she is doing anything she does not like."

"You are for Paris," Nôtredame answered, with apparent surprise. "I thought all ladies liked Paris. Now, if madame were leaving Paris and going to the country——"

"The country!" M. de Vidoche exclaimed, with an impatient oath. "She would bury herself there if she could!" And he added something under his breath, the point of which it was not very difficult to guess.

Madame de Vidoche forced a smile, striving, woman-like, to cover all. "It is natural I should like Pinatel," she said timidly, her eye on her husband. "I have lived there so much."

"Yes, madame, you are never tired of reminding me of that!" M. de Vidoche retorted harshly. Women who are afraid of their husbands say the right thing once in a

hundred times. "You will tell this gentleman in a moment that I was a beggar when I married you! But if I was——"

"Oh, Charles!" she murmured faintly.

"That is right! Cry now!" he exclaimed brutally. "Thank God, however, here is supper. And after supper we go on to Vernon. The roads are rutty, and you will have something else to do besides cry then."

The man in black, going on with his meal at the other end of the table, listened with an impassive face. Like all his profession, he seemed inclined to hear rather than to talk. But when supper came up with only one plate for the two—a mistake due to the crowded state of the inn—and M. de Vidoche fell to scolding very loudly, he seemed unable to refrain from saying a word in the innkeeper's defence. "It is not so very unusual for the husband to share his wife's plate," he said coolly; "and sometimes a good deal more that is hers."

M. de Vidoche looked at him for a moment, as if he were minded to ask him

what business it was of his; but he thought better of it, and instead said, with a scowl, "It is not so very unusual either for astrologers to make mistakes."

"Quacks," the man in black said calmly.

"I quite agree," M. de Vidoche replied, with mock politeness. "I accept the correction."

"Yet there is one thing to be said even then," the astrologer continued, slowly leaning forward, and, as if by chance, moving one of the candles so as to bring it directly between madame and himself. "I have noticed it, M. de Vidoche. They make mistakes sometimes in predicting marriages, and even births. But never in predicting—deaths."

M. de Vidoche, who may have had some key in his own breast which unlocked the full meaning of the other's words, started and looked across at him. Whatever he read in the pale, sombre countenance which the removal of the candle fully revealed to him, and in which the eyes, burning vividly, seemed alone alive, he shuddered. He made no reply. His look dropped. Even a little

of his high colour left his cheeks. He went on with his meal in silence. The four tall candles still burned dully on the table. But to M. de Vidoche they seemed on a sudden to be the candles that burn by the side of a corpse. In a flash he saw a room hung with black, a bed, and a silent covered form on it—a form with wan, fair hair—a woman's. And then he saw other things.

Clearly, the astrologer was no ordinary man.

He seemed to take no notice, however, of the effect his words had produced. Indeed, he no longer urged his attentions on M. de Vidoche. He turned politely to madame, and made some commonplace observation on the roads. She answered it—inattentively.

"You are looking at my boy," he continued; for Jehan was waiting inside the door, watching with a frightened, fascinated gaze his master's every act and movement. "I do not wonder that he attracts the ladies' eyes."

"He is a handsome child," she answered, smiling faintly.

"Yes, he is good-looking," the man in

black rejoined. "There is one thing which men of science sell that he will never need."

"What is that?" she asked curiously, looking at the astrologer for the first time with attention.

"A love-philtre," he answered courteously. "His looks, like madame's, will always supply its place."

She coloured, smiling a little sadly. "Are there such things?" she said. "Is it true? —I mean, I always thought that they were a child's tale."

"No more than poisons and antidotes, madame," he answered earnestly, "the preservative power of salt, or the destructive power of gunpowder. You take the Queen's herb, you sneeze; the drug of Paracelsus, you sleep; wine, you see double. Why is the powder of attraction more wonderful than these? Or if you remain unconvinced," he continued more lightly, "look round you, madame. You see young men loving old women, the high-born allying themselves with the vulgar, the ugly enchanting the beautiful. You see a hundred inexplicable

matches. Believe me, it is we who make them. I speak without motive," he added, bowing, "for Madame de Vidoche can never have need of other philtre than her eyes."

Madame, toying idly with a plate, her regards on the table, sighed. "And yet they say matches are made in heaven," she murmured softly.

"It is from heaven—from the stars—we derive our knowledge," he answered, in the same tone.

But his face!—it was well she did not see that! And before more passed, M. de Vidoche broke into the conversation. "What rubbish is this?" he said, speaking roughly to his wife. "Have you finished? Then let us pay this rascally landlord and be off. If you do not want to spend the night on the road, that is. Where are those fools of servants?"

He rose, and went to the door and shouted for them, and came back and took up his cloak and hat with much movement and bustle. But it was noticeable in all he did

that he never once met the astrologer's eye or looked his way. Even when he bade him a surly "Good-night"—casually uttered in the midst of injunctions to his wife to be quick—he spoke over his shoulder; and he left the room in the same fashion, completely absorbed, it seemed, in the fastening of his cloak.

Some, treated in this cavalier fashion, might have been hurt, and some might have resented it. But the man in black did neither. Left alone, he remained by the table in an expectant attitude, a sneering smile, which the light of the candles threw into high relief, on his grim visage. Suddenly the door opened, and M. de Vidoche, cloaked and covered, came in. Without raising his eyes, he looked round the room—for something he had mislaid, it seemed.

"Oh, by the way," he said suddenly, and without looking up.

"*My address?*" the man in black interjected, with a devilish readiness. "The end of the Rue Touchet in the Quartier du Marais, near the river. Where, believe me," he

continued, with a mocking bow, "I shall give you madame's horoscope with the greatest pleasure, or any other little matter you may require."

"I think you are the devil!" M. de Vidoche muttered wrathfully, his cheek growing pale.

"Possibly," the astrologer answered. "In that or any other case—*au revoir!*"

When the landlord came up a little later to apologise to M. Solomon Nôtredame de Paris for the inconvenience to which he had unwillingly put him, he found his guest in high good-humour. "It is nothing, my friend —it is nothing," M. Nôtredame said kindly. "I found my company good enough. This M. de Vidoche is of this country; and a rich man, I understand."

"Through his wife," the host said cautiously. "Ah! so rich that she could build our old castle here from the ground again."

"Madame de Vidoche was of Pinatel."

"To be sure. Monsieur knows everything. By Jumiéges to the north. I have

been there once. But she has a house in Paris besides, and estates, I hear, in the south—in Perigord."

"Ha!" the astrologer muttered. "Perigord again. That is odd, now."

CHAPTER IV.

THE HOUSE WITH TWO DOORS.

On the site of the old Palais des Tournelles, where was held the tournament in which Henry the Second was killed, Henry the Fourth built the Place Royale. You will not find it called by that name in any map of Paris of to-day; modern France, which has no history, traditions, or reverence, has carefully erased such landmarks in favour of her Grévys and Eiffels, her journalists and soap-boilers. But for all that, and though the Place Royale has now lost even its name, in the reign of the thirteenth Louis it was the centre of fashion. The Quartier du Marais, in which it stood, opposite the Ile de St. Louis, was then the Court quarter. It saw coaches come into common use among the nobility, and ruffs and primero go out, and a great many other queer things, such as Court quarters in those days looked to see.

The back stairs of a palace, however, are seldom an improving or brilliant place; or if they can be said to be brilliant at all, their brightness is of a somewhat lurid and ghastly character. The king's amusements — very royal and natural, no doubt, and, when viewed from the proper quarter, attractive enough—have another side; and that side is towards the back stairs. It is the same with the Court and its purlieus. They are the rough side of the cloth, the underside of the moss, the cancer under the fair linen. Secrets are no secrets there; and so it has always been. Things De Thou did not know, and Brantôme only guessed at, were household words there. They in the Court under-world knew all about that mysterious disease of which Gabrielle d'Estrées died after eating a citron at Zamet's—all, more than we know now or has ever been printed. That little prick of a knife which made the second Wednesday in May, 1610, a day memorable in history, was gossip down there a month before. Henry of Condé's death, Mazarin's marriage, D'Eon's sex, Cagliostro's birth, were no

mysteries in the by-ways of the Louvre and Petit Trianon. He who wrote "Under the king's hearthstone are many cockroaches" knew his world—a seamy, ugly, vicious, dangerous world.

If any street in the Paris of that day belonged to it, the Rue Touchet did; a little street a quarter of a mile from the Place Royale, on the verge of the Quartier du Marais. The houses on one side of the street had their backs to the river, from which they were divided only by a few paces of foul foreshore. These houses were older than the opposite row, were irregularly built, and piled high with gables and crooked chimneys. Here and there a beetle-browed passage led beneath them to the river; and one out of every two was a tavern, or worse. A fencing-school and a gambling-hell occupied the two largest. To the south-west the street ended in a *cul-de-sac*, being closed by a squat stone house, built out of the ruins of an old water gateway that had once stood there. The windows of this house were never unshuttered, the door was seldom opened in

the daylight. It was the abode of Solomon Nôtredame. Once a week or so the astrologer's sombre figure might be seen entering or leaving, and men at tavern doors would point at him, and slatternly women, leaning out of window, cross themselves. But few in the Rue Touchet knew that the house had a second door, which did not open on the water, as the back doors of the riverside houses did, but on a quiet street leading to it.

M. Nôtredame's house was, in fact, double, and served two sorts of clients. Great ladies and courtiers, wives of the long robe and city madams, came to the door in the quiet street, and knew nothing of the Rue Touchet. Through the latter, on the other hand, came those who paid in meal, if not in malt; lackeys and waiting-maids, and skulking apprentices and led-captains—the dregs of the quarter, sodden with vice and crime—and knowledge.

The house was furnished accordingly. The clients of the Rue Touchet found the astrologer in a room divided into two by

scarlet hangings, so arranged as to afford the visitor a partial view of the farther half, where the sullen glow of a furnace disclosed alembics and crucibles, mortars and retorts, a multitude of uncouth vessels and phials, and all the mysterious apparatus of the alchemist. Immediately about him the shuddering rascal found things still more striking. A dead hand hung over each door, a skeleton peeped from a closet. A stuffed alligator sprawled on the floor, and, by the wavering uncertain light of the furnace, seemed each moment to be awaking to life. Cabalistic signs and strange instruments and skull-headed staves were everywhere, with parchment scrolls and monstrous mandrakes, and a farrago of such things as might impose on the ignorant; who, if he pleased, might sit on a coffin, and, when he would amuse himself, found a living toad at his foot! Dimly seen, crowded together, ill-understood, these things were enough to overawe the vulgar, and had often struck terror into the boldest ruffians the Rue Touchet could boast.

From this room a little staircase, closed

at the top by a strong door, led to the chamber and antechamber in which the astrologer received his real clients. Here all was changed. Both rooms were hung, canopied, carpeted with black: were vast, death-like, empty. The antechamber contained two stools, and in the middle of the floor a large crystal ball on a bronze stand. That was all, except the silver hanging lamp, which burned blue, and added to the funereal gloom of the room.

The inner chamber, which was lighted by six candles set in sconces round the wall, was almost as bare. A kind of altar at the farther end bore two great tomes, continually open. In the middle of the floor was an astrolabe on an ebony pillar, and the floor itself was embroidered in white, with the signs of the Zodiac and the twelve Houses arranged in a circle. A seat for the astrologer stood near the altar. And that was all. For power over such as visited him here Nôtredame depended on a higher range of ideas; on the more subtle forms of superstition, the influence of gloom and silence

on the conscience: and above all, perhaps, on his knowledge of the world—*and them.*

Into the midst of all this came that shrinking, terrified little mortal, Jehan. It was his business to open the door into the quiet street, and admit those who called. He was forbidden to speak under the most terrible penalties, so that visitors thought him dumb. For a week after his coming he lived in a world of almost intolerable fear. The darkness and silence of the house, the funereal lights and hangings, the skulls and bones and horrid things he saw, and on which he came when he least expected them, almost turned his brain. He shuddered, and crouched hither and thither. His face grew white, and his eyes took a strange staring look, so that the sourest might have pitied him. It wanted, in a word, but a little to send the child stark mad; and but for his hardy training and outdoor life, that little would not have been wanting.

He might have fled, for he was trusted at the door, and at any moment could have

opened it and escaped. But Jehan never doubted his master's power to find him and bring him back; and the thought did not enter his mind. After a week or so, familiarity wrought on him, as on all. The house grew less terrifying, the darkness lost its horror, the air of silence and dread its first paralysing influence. He began to sleep better. Curiosity, in a degree, took the place of fear. He fell to poring over the signs of the Zodiac, and to taking furtive peeps into the crystal. The toad became his play-fellow. He fed it with cockroaches, and no longer wanted employment.

The astrologer saw the change in the lad, and perhaps was not wholly pleased with it. By-and-by he took steps to limit it. One day he found Jehan playing with the toad with something of a boy's *abandon*, making the uncouth creature leap over his hands, and tickling it with a straw. The boy rose on his entrance, and shrank away; for his fear of the man's sinister face and silent ways was not in any way lessened. But Nôtredame called him back. "You are

beginning to forget," he said, eyeing the child grimly.

The boy trembled under his gaze, but did not dare to answer.

"Whose are you?"

Jehan looked this way and that. At length, with dry lips, he muttered, "Yours."

"No, you are not," the man in black replied. "Think again. You have a short memory."

Jehan thought and sweated. But the man would have his answer, and at last Jehan whispered, "The devil's."

"That is better," the astrologer said coldly. "Do you know what this is?"

He held up a glass bowl. The boy recognised it, and his hair began to rise. But he shook his head.

"It is holy water," the man in black said, his small cruel eyes devouring the boy. "Hold out your hand."

Jehan dared not refuse "This will try you," Nôtredame said slowly, "whether you are the devil's or not. If not, water will not hurt you. If so, if you are his for ever and

ever, to do his will and pleasure, then it will burn like fire!"

At the last word he suddenly sprinkled some with a brush on the boy's hand. Jehan leapt back with a shriek of pain, and, holding the burned hand to his breast, glared at his master with starting eyes.

"It burns," said the astrologer pitilessly. "It burns. It is as I said. You are *his. His!* After this I think you will remember. Now go."

Jehan went away, shuddering with horror and pain. But the lesson had not the precise effect intended. He continued to fear his master, but he began to hate him also, with a passionate, lasting hatred strange in a child. Though he still shrank and crouched in his presence, behind his back he was no longer restrained by fear. The boy knew of no way in which he could avenge himself. He did not form any plans to that end, he did not conceive the possibility of the thing. But he hated; and, given the opportunity, was ripe to seize it.

He was locked in whenever Nôtredame

"JEHAN LEAPT BACK WITH A SHRIEK OF PAIN" (*p.* 74).

went out; and in this way he spent many solitary and fearful hours. These led him, however, in the end, to a discovery. One day, about the middle of December, while he was poking about the house in the astrologer's absence, he found a door. I say "found," for though it was not a secret door, it was small and difficult to detect, being placed in the side of the straight, narrow passage at the head of the little staircase which led from the lower to the upper chambers. At first he thought it was locked, but coming to examine it more closely, though in mere curiosity, he found the handle of the latch let into a hollow of the panel. He pressed this, and the door yielded a little.

At the time the boy was scared. He saw the place was dark, drew the door to the jamb again, and went away without satisfying his curiosity. But in a little while the desire to know what was behind the door overcame his terror. He returned with a taper, and, pressing the latch again, pushed the door open and entered, his heart beating loudly.

He held up his taper, and saw a very narrow, bare closet, made in the thickness of the wall. And that was all, for the place was empty—the one and only thing it contained being a soft, rough mat which covered the floor. The boy stared fearfully about him, still expecting something dreadful, but there was nothing else to be seen. And gradually his fears subsided, and his curiosity with them, and he went out again.

Another day, however, when he came into this place, he made a discovery. Against either wall he saw a morsel of black cloth fastened—a little flap a few inches long and three inches wide. He held the light first to one and then to another of these, but he could make nothing of them until he noticed that the lower edges were loose. Then he raised one. It disclosed a long, narrow slit, through which he could see the laboratory, with the fire burning dully, the phials glistening, and the crocodile going through its unceasing pretence of arousing itself. He raised the other, and found a slit there, too; but as the chamber on that side—the

room with the astrolabe—was in darkness, he could see nothing. He understood, however. The closet was a spying-place, and these were Judas-holes, so arranged that the occupant, himself unheard and unseen, could see and hear all that happened on either side of him.

It was the astrologer's custom to lock up the large room next the Rue Touchet when he went out. For this reason, and because the place was forbidden, the boy lingered at the Judas-hole, gazing into it. He knew by this time most of the queer things it contained, and the red glow of the furnace fire gave it, to his mind, a weird kind of comfort. He listened to the ashes falling, and the ticking of some clockwork at the farther end. He began idly to enumerate all the things he could see; but the curtain which shut off the laboratory proper threw a great shadow across the room, and this he strove in vain to pierce. To see the better, he put out his light and looked again. He had scarcely brought his eyes back to the slit, however, when a low grating noise caught

his ear. He started and held his breath, but before he could stir a finger the heavy door which communicated with the Rue Touchet slowly opened a foot or two, and the astrologer came in.

For a few seconds the boy remained gazing, afraid to breathe or move. Then, with an effort, he dropped the cloth over the slit, and crept softly away.

CHAPTER V.

THE UPPER PORTAL.

The astrologer was not alone. A tall figure, cloaked and muffled to the chin, entered after him, and stood waiting at his elbow while he secured the fastenings of the door. Apparently, they had only met on the threshold, for the stranger, after looking round him and silently noting the fantastic disorder of the room, said, in a hoarse voice, "You do not know me?"

"Perfectly, M. de Vidoche," the astrologer answered, removing his hat.

"Did you know I was following you?"

"I came to show you the way."

"That is a lie, at any rate!" the young noble retorted, with a sneer, "for I did not know I was coming myself."

"Until you saw me," the astrologer answered, unmoved. "Will you not take off

your cloak? You will need it when you leave."

M. de Vidoche complied with an ill grace. "The usual stock-in-trade, I see," he muttered, looking round him scornfully. "Skulls and bones, and dead hands and gibbet-ropes. Faugh! The place smells. I suppose these are the things you keep to frighten children."

"Some," Nôtredame answered calmly—he was busy lighting a lamp—"and some are for sale."

"For sale?" M. de Vidoche cried incredulously. "Who will buy them?"

"Some one thing, and some another," the astrologer answered carelessly. "Take this, for instance," he continued, turning to his visitor, and looking at him for the first time. "I expect to find a customer for *that* very shortly."

M. de Vidoche followed the direction of his finger, and shuddered, despite himself. "That" was a coffin. "Enough of this," he said, with savage impatience. "Suppose you get off your high horse, and come to

business. Can I sit, man, or are you going to keep me standing all night?"

The man in black brought forward two stools, and led the way behind the curtain. "It is warmer here," he said, pushing aside an earthen pipkin, and clearing a space with his foot in front of the glowing embers. "Now I am at your service, M. de Vidoche. Pray be seated."

"Are we alone?" the young noble asked suspiciously.

"Trust me for that," the astrologer answered. "I know my business."

But M. de Vidoche seemed to find some difficulty in stating his; though he had evinced so high a regard for time a moment before. He sat irresolute, stealing malevolent glances first at his companion, and then at the dull, angry-looking fire. If he expected M. Nôtre-dame to help him, however, he did not yet know his host. The astrologer sat patiently waiting, with every expression, save placid expectation, discharged from his face.

"Oh, d——n you!" the young man ejaculated at last. "Have you got nothing

to say? You know what I want," he added, with irritation, "as well as I do."

"I shall be happy to learn," the astrologer answered politely.

"Give it me without more words, and let me go!"

The astrologer raised his eyebrows. "Alas! there is a limit to omniscience," he said, shaking his head gently. "It is true we keep it in stock—to frighten children. But it does not help me at present, M. de Vidoche."

M. de Vidoche looked at him with an evil scowl. "I see; you want me to commit myself," he muttered. The perspiration stood on his forehead, and his voice was husky with rage or some other emotion. "I was a fool to come here," he continued. "If you must have it, I want to kill a cat; and I want something to give to it."

The astrologer laughed silently. "The mountain was in labour, and lo! a cat!" he said, in a tone of amusement. "And lo! a cat! Well, in that case I am afraid you have come to the wrong place, M. de

Vidoche. I don't kill cats. There is no risk in it, you see," he continued, looking fixedly at his companion, "and no profit. Nobody cares about a cat. The first herbalist you come to will give you what you want for a few sous. Even if the creature turns black within the hour, and its mouth goes to the nape of its neck," he went on, with a horrid smile, "as Madame de Beaufort's did—*cui malo?*—no one is a penny the worse. But if it were a question of—— I think I saw monsieur riding in company with Mademoiselle de Farincourt to-day?"

M. de Vidoche, who had been contemplating his tormentor with eyes of rage and horror, started at the unexpected question. "Well," he muttered, "and what if I was?"

"Oh, nothing," the man in black answered carelessly. "Mademoiselle is beautiful, and monsieur is a happy man if she smiles on him. But she is high-born; and proud, I am told." He leaned forward as he spoke, and warmed his long, lean hands at the fire. But his beady eyes never left the other's face.

M. de Vidoche writhed under their gaze.

"Curse you!" he muttered hoarsely. "What do you mean?"

"Her family are proud also, I am told; and powerful. Friends of the Cardinal too, I hear." The man in black's smile was like nothing save the crocodile's.

M. de Vidoche rose from his seat, but sat down again.

"He would avenge the honour of the family to the death," continued the astrologer gently. "To the death, I should say. Don't you think so, M. de Vidoche?"

The perspiration stood in thick drops on the young man's forehead, and he glared at his tormentor. But the latter met the look placidly, and seemed ignorant of the effect he was producing. "It is a pity, therefore, monsieur is not free to marry," he said, shaking his head regretfully—"a great pity. One does not know what may happen. Yet, on the other hand, if he had not married he would be a poor man now."

M. de Vidoche sprang to his feet with an oath. But he sat down again.

"When he married he *was* a poor man, I

think," the astrologer continued, for the first time averting his gaze from the other's face, and looking into the fire with a queer smile. "And in debt. Madame—the present Madame de Vidoche, I mean—paid his debts, and brought him an estate, I believe."

"Of which she has never ceased to remind him twice a day since!" the young man cried in a terrible voice. And then in a moment he lost all self-control, all disguise, all the timid cunning which had marked him hitherto. He sprang to his feet. The veins in his temples swelled, his face grew red. So true is it that small things try us more than great ones, and small grievances rub deeper raws than great wrongs. "My God!" he said between his teeth, "if you knew what I have suffered from that woman! Pale-faced, puling fool, I have loathed her these five years, and I have been tied to her and her whining ways and her nun's face! Twice a day? No, ten times a day, twenty times a day, she has reminded me of my debts, my poverty, and my straits before I married her! And

of her family! And her three marshals! And her——"

He stopped for very lack of breath. "Madame was of good family?" the man in black said abruptly. He had grown suddenly attentive. His shadow on the wall behind him was still and straight-backed.

"Oh, yes," the husband answered bitterly.

"In Perigord?'

"Oh, yes."

"Three marshals of France?" M. Nôtredame murmured thoughtfully; but there was a strange light in his eyes, and he kept his face carefully averted from his companion. "That is not common! That is certainly something to boast of!"

"*Mon Dieu!* She did boast of it, though no one else allowed the claim. And of her blood of Roland!" M. de Vidoche cried, with scorn. His voice still shook, and his hands trembled with rage. He strode up and down.

"What was her name before she

married?" the astrologer asked, stooping over the fire.

The young man stopped, arrested in his passion—stopped, and looked at him suspiciously. "Her name?" he muttered. "What has that to do with it?"

"If you want me to—draw her horoscope," the astrologer replied, with a cunning smile, "I must have something to go upon."

"Diane de Martinbault," the young man answered sullenly; and then, in a fresh burst of rage, he muttered, "Diane! *Diable!*"

"She inherited her estates from her father?"

"Yes."

"Who had a son? A child who died young?" the astrologer continued coolly.

M. de Vidoche looked at him. "That is true," he said sulkily. "But I do not see what it has to do with you."

For answer, the man in black began to laugh, at first silently, then aloud—a sly devil's laugh, that sounded more like the glee of fiends sporting over a lost soul than

any human mirth, so full was it of derision and mockery and insult. He made no attempt to check or disguise it, but rather seemed to flout it in the other's face; for when the young noble asked him, with fierce impatience, what it was, and what he meant, he did not explain. He only cried, "In a moment! In a moment, noble sir, I swear you shall have what you want. But—ha! ha!" And then he fell to laughing again, more loudly and shrilly than before.

M. de Vidoche turned white and red with rage. His first thought was that a trap had been laid for him, and that he had fallen into it; that to what he had said there had been witnesses; and that now the astrologer had thrown off the mask. With a horrible expression of shame and fear on his countenance he stood at bay, peering into the dark corners, of which there were many in that room, and plumbing the shadows. When no one appeared and nothing happened, his fears passed, but not his rage. With his hand on his sword, he turned hotly on his confederate. "You

dog!" he said between his teeth, and his eyes gleamed dangerously in the light of the lamp, "know that for a farthing I would slit your throat! And I will, too, if you do not this instant stop that witch's grin of yours! Are you going to do what I ask, or are you not?"

"Chut! chut!" the astrologer answered, waving his hand in deprecation. "I said so, and I am always as good as my word."

"Ay, but now—now!" the young man retorted furiously. "You have played with me long enough. Do you think that I am going to spend the night in this charnel-house of yours?"

M. Nôtredame began to fear that he had carried his cruel amusement too far. He had enjoyed himself vastly, and made an unexpected discovery: one which opened an endless vista of mischief and plunder to his astute gaze. But it was not his policy to drive his customer to distraction, and he changed his tone. "Peace, peace," he said, spreading out his hands humbly. "You

shall have it now; now, this instant. There is only one little preliminary."

"Name it!" the other said imperiously.

"The price. A horoscope, with the House of Death in the ascendant—the Upper Portal, as we call it—is a hundred crowns, M. de Vidoche. There is the risk, you see."

"You shall have it. Give me the—the stuff!"

The young man's voice trembled, but it was with anger and impatience, not with fear. The astrologer recognised the change in him, and fell into his place. He went, without further demur, to a little shelf in the darkest corner of the laboratory, whence he reached down a crucible. He was in the act of peering into this, with his back to his visitor, when M. de Vidoche uttered a startled cry, and, springing towards him, seized his arm. "You fiend!" the young man hissed—he was pale to the lips, and shook as with an ague—"there is someone there! There is someone listening!"

For a second the man in black stood breathless, his hand arrested, the shadow

"FOR A SECOND THE MAN IN BLACK STOOD BREATHLESS" (*p.* 92).

of his companion's terror darkening his face. M. de Vidoche pointed with a trembling finger to the staircase which led to the farther part of the house, and on this the two bent their sombre, guilty eyes. The lamp burned unsteadily, giving out an odour of smoke. The room was full of shadows, uncouth distorted shapes, that rose and fell with the light, and had something terrifying in their sudden appearances and vanishings. But in all the place there was nothing so appalling or so ugly as the two vicious, panic-stricken faces that glared into the darkness.

The man in black was the first to break the silence. "What did you hear?" he muttered at length, after a long, long period of waiting and watching.

"Someone moved there," Vidoche answered, under his breath. His voice still trembled; his face was livid with terror.

"Nonsense!" the other answered. He knew the place, and was fast recovering his courage. "What was the sound like, man?"

"A dull, heavy sound. Someone moved."

M. Nôtredame laughed, but not pleasantly. "It was the toad," he said. "There is no other living thing here. The door on the staircase is locked. It is thick, too. A dozen men might be behind it, yet they would not hear a word that passed in this room. But come; you shall see."

He led the way to the farther end of the room, and, moving some of the larger things, showed M. de Vidoche that there was no one there. Still, the young man was only half-convinced. Even when the toad was found lurking in a skull which had rolled to the floor, he continued to glance about him doubtfully. "I do not think it was that," he said. "Are you sure that the door is locked?"

"Try it," the astrologer answered curtly.

M. de Vidoche did, and nodded. "Yes," he said. "All the same, I will get out of this. Give me the stuff, will you?"

The man in black raised the lamp in one hand, and with the other selected from

the crucible two tiny yellow packets. He stood a moment, weighing them in his hand and looking lovingly at them, and seemed unwilling to part with them. "They are power," he said, in a voice that was little above a whisper. The alarm had tried even his nerves, and he was not quite himself. "The greatest power of all—death. They are the key of the Upper Portal—the true Pulvis Olympicus. Take one to-day, one to-morrow, in liquid, and you will feel neither hunger, nor cold, nor want, nor desire any more for ever. The late King of England took one; but there, it is yours, my friend."

"Is it painful?" the young man whispered, shuddering, and with eyes averted.

The tempter grinned horribly. "What is that to you?" he said. "It will not bring her mouth to the back of her neck. That is enough for you to know."

"It will not be detected?"

"Not by the bunglers they call doctors," the astrologer answered scornfully. "Blind bats! You may trust me for that. Of what did the King of England die? A tertian

ague. So will madame. But if you think——"

He stopped on a sudden, his hand in the air, and the two stood gazing at one another with alarm printed on their faces. The loud clanging note of a bell, harshly struck in the house, came dolefully to their ears. "What is it?" M. de Vidoche muttered uneasily.

"A client," the astrologer answered quietly. "I will see. Do not stir until I come back to you."

M. de Vidoche made an impatient movement towards the door in the Rue Touchet: and doubtless he would much have preferred to be gone at once, since he had now got what he wanted. But the man in black was already unlocking the door at the head of the little staircase, and uttering a querulous oath M. de Vidoche resigned himself to wait. With a dark look he hid the powders on his person.

* * * * *

He thought himself alone. But all the same a white-faced boy lay within a few feet of him, watching his every movement, and

listening to his breathing—a small boy, instinct with hate and loathing. Impunity renders people careless, or M. Nôtredame would not have been so ready to set down the noise his confederate made to the toad. The Judas-hole and the spying-place would have come to mind, and in a trice he would have caught the listener in the act, and this history would never have been written.

For Jehan, though his master's first entrance and appearance had sent him fleeing, breathless and panic-stricken, from his post, had not been able to keep aloof long. The house was dull, silent, dark; only in the closet was amusement to be found. So while terror dragged him one way, curiosity haled him the other, and at last had the victory. He listened and shivered at the head of the stairs until that shrill eldritch peal of laughter in which the astrologer indulged, and for which he was destined to pay dearly, penetrated even the thick door. Then he could hold out no longer. His curiosity grew intolerable. Laughter! Laughter in that house! Slowly and

stealthily the boy opened the door of the dark closet, and crept in. Just across the threshold he stumbled over the extinguished taper, and this it was which caused M. de Vidoche's alarm.

Jehan fancied himself discovered, and lay sweating and trembling until the search for the toad was over. Then he sat up, and, finding himself safe, began to listen. What he heard was not clear, nor perfectly intelligible; but gradually there stole even into his boyish mind a perception of something horrible. The speakers' looks of fear, their low tones and dark glances, the panic which seized them when they fancied themselves overheard, and their relief when nothing came of it, did more to bring the conviction home to his mind than their words. Even of these he caught enough to assure him that someone was to be poisoned—to be put out of the world. Only the name of the victim—that escaped him.

* * * * *

Probably M. de Vidoche, left to himself,

found his thoughts poor company, for by-and-by he grew restless. He walked across the room and listened, and walked again and listened. The latter movement brought him by chance to the foot of the little flight of six steps by which the astrologer had retired, and he looked up and saw that the door at the top was ajar. Impelled by curiosity, or suspicion, or the mere desire to escape from himself, he stole up, and, opening it farther, thrust his head through and listened.

He remained in this position about a minute. Then he turned, and crept down again, and stood, thinking, at the foot of the stairs, with an expression of such utter and complete amazement on his face as almost transformed the man. Something he had heard or seen which he could not understand! Something incredible, something almost miraculous! For all else, even his guilty purpose, seemed swallowed up in sheer astonishment.

The stupor held him until he heard the astrologer's steps. Even then he only turned and looked. But if ever dumb lips asked a question, his did then.

The man in black nodded silently. He seemed not at all surprised that the other had heard or seen what he had. Even in him the thing, whatever it was, had worked a change. His eyes shone, his eyebrows were raised, his face wore a pale smile of triumph and conceit.

M. de Vidoche found his voice at last. "My wife!" he whispered.

The astrologer's shoulders went up to his ears. He spread out his hands. He nodded —once, twice. "*Mais oui, Madame!*" he said.

"Here?—now?" M. de Vidoche stammered, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"She is in the chamber of the astrolabe."

"*Mon Dieu!*" the husband exclaimed. "*Mon Dieu!*" And then for a moment he shook, as if someone were passing over his grave. His face was pale. There was dread mingled with his surprise. "I do not understand," he muttered at last. "What does it mean? What is she doing here?"

"She has come for a love-philtre," M. Nôtredame answered, with a sphinx-like smile.

"For whom?"

"For you."

The husband drew a deep breath. "For me?" he exclaimed. "Impossible!"

"Possible," the man in black answered quietly; "and true."

"Then what shall you do?"

"Give her one," the astrologer answered. The enigmatical smile, which had been all along playing on his face, grew deeper, keener, more cruel. His eyes gleamed with triumph—and evil. "I shall give her one," he said again.

"But—what will she do with it?" M. de Vidoche muttered.

"*Take it!* You fool, cannot you understand?" the man in black answered sharply. "Give me back the powders. I shall give them to her. She will take them—*herself.* You will be saved—all!"

M. de Vidoche reeled. "My God!" he cried. "I think you are the devil!"

"Perhaps," the man in black answered "but give me the powders."

CHAPTER VI.

THE POWDER OF ATTRACTION.

MEANWHILE, a few yards away, in the room of the astrolabe, Madame de Vidoche sat, waiting and trembling, afraid to move from the spot where the astrologer had placed her, and longing for his return. The minutes seemed endless, the house a grave. The silence and mystery which wrapped her round, the sombre hangings, the burning candles, the cabalistic figures filled her with awe and apprehension. She was a timid woman; nothing but that last and fiercest hunger of all, the hunger for love, could have driven her to this desperate step or brought her here. But she was here, it had brought her; and though fear blanched her cheek, and her limbs shook under her, and she dared not pray—for what was this she was doing?—she did not repent, or wish the step untaken, or go back on her desire.

The place was dreadful to her; but not so dreadful as the cold home, the harsh words, the mockery of love, the slowly growing knowledge that there never had been love, from which she was here to escape. She was alone, but not more lonely than she had been for months in her own house. The man who daily met her with gibes and taunts, and seldom spoke without reminding her how pale and colourless she showed beside the florid witty beauties of the Court—*his friends*—was still her all, and had been her idol. If he failed her, the world was empty indeed. Only one thing remained therefore; by hook or crook, by all a woman might do or dare, by submission, by courage, to win back his love. She had tried. God knows she had tried! She had knelt to him, and he had struck her. She had dressed and been gay, and striven to jest as his friends jested: he had scourged her with a cutting sneer. She had prayed, and Heaven had not answered. She had turned from Heaven—a white-faced, pining woman, little more than a girl—and she was here.

Only let the man be quick! Let him be quick and give her what she sought; and then scarcely any price he could ask should strain her gratitude. At last she heard his step, and in a moment he came in. Against the black background, and seen by the gloomy light of the candles, he looked taller, leaner, paler, more sombre than life. His eyes glowed with unnatural lustre. Madame shuddered as he came towards her; and he saw it, and grinned behind his cadaverous mask.

"Madame," he said gravely, bowing his head, "it is as I hoped. Venus is in the ascendant for nine days from to-day, and in fortunate conjunction with Mars. I am happy that you come to me at a time so propitious A very little effort at this season will suffice. But it is necessary, if you would have the charm work, to preserve the most absolute silence and secrecy in regard to it."

Her lips were dry, her tongue seemed to cleave to her mouth. She felt shame as well as fear in this man's presence. But she made an effort, and muttered, "It will work?"

"I will answer for it!" he replied bluntly, a world of dubious meaning in his tone and eyes. "It is the powder of attraction, by the use of which Diane de Poitiers won the love of the king, though she surpassed him by twenty years; and Madame de Valentinois held the hearts of men till her seventieth winter. Madame de Hautefort uses it. It is made of liquid gold, etherealised and strengthened with secret drugs. I have made up two packets, but it will be safer if madame will take both at once, dissolved in good wine and before the expiration of the ninth day."

Madame de Vidoche took the packets, trembling. A little red dyed her pale cheeks. "Is that all?" she murmured, faintly.

"All, madame; except that when you drink it, you must think of your husband," he answered. As he said this he averted his face; for, try as he would, he could not check the evil smile that curled his lip. *Dieu!* Was ever so grim a jest known? Or so forlorn, so helpless, so infantine a fool? He could almost find it in his heart to pity

her. As for her husband—ah, how he would bleed him when it was over!

"How much am I to pay you, sir?" she asked timidly, when she had hidden away the precious packets in her bosom. She had got what she wanted; she was panting to be gone.

"Twenty crowns," he answered, coldly. "The charm avails for nine moons. After that——"

"I shall need more?" she asked; for he had paused.

"Well, no, I think not," he answered slowly—hesitating strangely, almost stammering. "I think in your case, madame, the effect will be lasting."

She had no clue to the fantastic impulse, the ghastly humour, which inspired the words; and she paid him gladly. He would not take the money in his hands, but bade her lay it on the great open book, "because the gold was alloyed, and not virgin." In one or two other ways he played his part; directing her, for instance, if she would increase the strength of the charm, to gaze at the planet Venus for

half an hour each evening, but not through glass or with any metal on her person. And then he let her out by the door which opened on the quiet street.

"Madame has, doubtless, her woman, or some attendant?" he said, looking up and down. "Or I——"

"Oh, yes, yes!" she answered, gasping in the cold night air. "She is here. Good-night, sir."

He muttered some words in a strange tongue, and, as Madame de Vidoche's attendant came out of the shadow to meet her, turned and went in again.

The night was dark as well as cold, but madame, in the first fervour of her spirits, did not heed it. She suffered her maid to wrap her up warmly, and draw the cloak more closely round her throat; but she was scarcely conscious of the attention, and bore it as a child might—in silence. Her eyes shone in the darkness; her heart beat with a soft subtle joy. She had the charm—the key to happiness! It was in her bosom; and every moment, under cover of the cloak and night,

her fingers flew to it and assured her it was safe. The scruples with which she had contemplated the interview troubled her no longer. In her joy and relief that the ordeal was over and the philtre gained, she knew no doubt, no suspicion. She lived only for the moment when she might put the talisman to the test, and see love wake again in those eyes which, whether they smiled or scowled, fate had made the lodestones of her life.

The streets, by reason of the cold, were quiet enough. No one remarked the two women as they flitted along under cover of the wall. Presently, however, the bell of a church close at hand began to ring for service, and the sound, startling madame, brought her suddenly, chillily, sharply, to earth again. She stopped. "What is that?" she said. "It cannot be compline. It wants three hours of midnight."

"It is St. Thomas's Day," the woman with her answered.

"So it is," madame replied, moving on again, but more slowly. "Of course; it is

four days to Christmas. Don't they call him the Apostle of Faith, Margot?"

"Yes, madame."

"To be sure," madame rejoined thoughtfully. "To be sure; yes, we should have faith—we should have faith." And with that she buoyed herself up again (as people will in certain moods, using the strangest floats), and went on gaily, her feet tripping to the measure of her heart, and her hand on the precious packet that was to change the world for her. On the foullest mud gleams sometimes the brightest phosphorescence: otherwise it were not easy to conceive how even momentary happiness could come of the house in the Rue Touchet!

The two women had nearly reached the Church of St. Gervais by the Grève, when the sound of a swift stealthy footstep coming along the street behind them caught the maid's ear. It was not a reassuring sound at night and in that place. The dark square of the Grève, swept by the icy wind from the river, lay before them; and though a brazier, surrounded by a knot of men belonging to

the watch, burned in the middle of the open, the two women were reluctant to show themselves where they might meet with rudeness. Margot laid her hand on her mistress's arm, and for a few seconds the two stood listening, with thumping hearts. The step came on—a light, pattering step. Acting on a common impulse the women turned and looked at one another. Then slipping noiselessly into the shadow cast by the church porch, they pressed themselves against the wall, and stood scarcely daring to breathe.

But fortune was against them, or their follower's eye was keen beyond the ordinary. They had not been there many seconds before he came running up—a stooping figure, slight and short. He slackened speed abruptly, and stopped exactly opposite their lurking-place. A moment of suspense, and then a pale face, rendered visible by a gleam from the distant fire, looked in on them, and a thin, panting voice murmured timidly, "Madame! Madame de Vidoche, if you please!"

"Saint Siége!" madame's woman gasped,

"'MADAME! MADAME DE VIDOCHE, IF YOU PLEASE!'" (*p.* 112).

in a voice of astonishment. "I declare it is a child!"

Madame almost laughed in her relief. "Ah!" she said, "how you frightened us! I thought you were a man dogging us—a thief!"

"I am not," the boy said simply.

This time Margot laughed. "Who are you, then?" she asked, briskly stepping out, "and why have you been following us? You seem to have my lady's name pretty pat," she added, sharply.

"I want to speak to her," the boy answered, his lip trembling. In truth, he was trembling all over with fear and excitement. But the darkness hid that.

"Oh!" Madame de Vidoche said graciously. "Well, you may speak. But tell me first who you are, and be quick about it. It is cold and late."

"I am from the house where you have been," Jehan answered bravely. "You saw me at Les Andelys, too, when you were at supper, madame. I was the boy at the door. I want to speak to you alone, please."

"Alone!" madame exclaimed.

The boy nodded firmly. "If you please," he said.

"Hoity-toity!" Margot exclaimed; and she was for demurring. "He only wants to beg," she said.

"I don't!" the boy cried, with tears in his voice.

"Then it is a present he wants!" she rejoined, scornfully. "They expect their vales at those places. And we are to freeze while he makes a tale."

But madame, out of pity or curiosity, would hear him. She bade the woman wait a few paces away. And when they were alone: "Now," she said kindly, "what is it? You must be quick, for it is very cold."

"*He* sent me after you—with a message," Jehan answered.

Madame started, and her hand went to the packet. "Do you mean M. Nôtredame?" she murmured.

The boy nodded. "He—he said he had forgotten one thing," he continued, halting between his sentences and shivering.

"He—he said you were to alter one thing, madame."

"Oh!" Madame answered frigidly, her heart sinking, her pride roused by this intervention of the boy, who seemed to know all. "What thing, if you please?"

Jehan looked quickly and fearfully over his shoulder. But all was quiet. "He said he had forgotten that your husband was dark," he stammered.

"Dark!" madame muttered in astonishment.

"Yes, dark-complexioned," Jehan continued desperately. "And that being so, you were not to take the—the charm yourself."

Madame's eyes flashed with anger. "Oh!" she said, "indeed! And is that all?"

"But to give it to him, without telling him," the boy rejoined, with sudden spirit and firmness.

Madame started and drew a deep breath. "Are you sure you have made no mistake?" she said, trying to read the boy's face. But it was too dark for that.

"Quite sure," he answered hardily.

"Oh," madame said, slowly and thoughtfully; "very well. Is that all?"

"That is all," he replied, drawing back a step; but reluctantly, as it seemed.

Margot, who had been all the time moving a little nearer and a little nearer, came right up at this. "Now, my lady," she said sharply, "I beg you will have done. This is no place for us at this time of night, and this little imp of Satan ought to be about his business. I am sure I am perishing with cold, and the sound of those creaking boats on the river makes me think of nothing but gibbets and corpses, till I have got the creeps all down my back! And the watch will be here presently."

"Very well, Margot," madame answered; "I am coming." But still she looked at the boy and lingered. "You are sure there is nothing else?" she murmured.

"Nothing," he answered.

She thought his manner odd, and wondered why he lingered; why he did not hurry off, since the night was cold and he was bareheaded. But Margot pressed her again,

and she turned, saying reluctantly, "Very well, I am coming."

"Ay, and so is Christmas!" the woman grumbled. And this time she fairly took her by the arm and hurried her away.

"That is not a good retort, Margot!" madame said presently, when they had gone a few paces, and were flitting hand-in-hand across the Grève, with heads bent to the wind, "for it wants only four days to Christmas. You had forgotten that!"

"I think you are fey, my lady!" the woman replied, in an ill-temper. "I have not seen you so gay these twelve months; and what with the cold, and fear of the watch and monsieur, I am ready to sink. You must have heard fine news down there."

But madame did not answer. She was thinking of last Christmas. Her husband had gone to the revels at the Palais Cardinal, which was then in building. She had offered to go with him, and he had told her, with an oath, that if she did she should remember it. So she had stopped at home alone—her first Christmas in Paris. She had gone to mass,

and then had sat all day in the cold, splendid house, and cried. Half the servants had played truant, and her woman had been cross, and for hours together no one had gone near her.

This Christmas it was to be different.

Madame's eyes began to shine again, and her heart to beat a pleasant measure. If she had her will, they would go to no pageants or merry-makings. But then he liked such things, and showed to advantage in them. Yes, they would go, and she would sit quiet as a mouse; and listening while they praised him, would feed all the time on the sweet knowledge that now he was hers—her own.

She had not done dreaming when they reached the house. The porter was drowsing in his lodge, the gate was ajar. They slipped into the dark silent courtyard, and, flitting across it, entered the house. Two servants lay stretched asleep in the hall, and in a little room to the left of the door they could hear others talking; but no one looked out. Fortune could not have aided them better. With a little laugh of relief and thankfulness

madame tripped up the grand staircase and under the great lamp which lit it and the hall.

Margot followed, but neither she nor her mistress saw who followed them: who had followed them across the windy Grève, through street and lane and byway; even, after a moment's hesitation, over the threshold of the court and into the house. A servant who heard the stairs creak as they went up, and looked out, fancied he saw a small black figure glide out of sight above; but as there were no children in the house, and this was a child, if anything, he thought his eyes deceived him—he was half-asleep—and, crossing himself, went back, yawning.

The boy could never quite explain—though often asked in after-years—what led him to run this risk. It is true he dared not return to the Rue Touchet; and he was only twelve years old, and knew nowhere else to go. But—— However, that is all that can be said. He did follow them.

He paused at the head of the stairs, and stood shivering under the great lamp. In front of him hung a pair of heavy curtains.

After a moment's hesitation he crept between them and found himself in a splendid apartment, spacious though sparely furnished, lit from the roof, and in character half-hall, half-parlour. A high marble chimney-piece in the new Italian mode faced him, and on either hand were two lofty doorways screened by curtains. The floor was of parquet, the walls were panelled in chestnut wood. On each side of the fire, which smouldered low between the dogs and was nearly out, a long bench, velvet-covered, ran along the wall. A posset-cup stood on a tripod on the hearth, and in the middle of the room a marble table bore a dish of sweetmeats and a tray of flasks and glasses. In that day, when people dined at eleven and supped at six, it was customary to take *les épices et le vin du coucher* before retiring at nine.

The boy stood cowering and listening—a strange, pale-faced little figure, reflected in a narrow mirror which decked one wall. It was very cold even here; outside he must die of cold. He heard the two women moving and talking in one of the rooms on the left;

otherwise the house was still. He looked about, hesitated, and at last stole on tip-toe across the floor to one of the doors on his right. The curtain which hid it trailed a yard on the ground. He sat down between it and the door, and, winding one corner of the thick heavy stuff round his frozen limbs, uttered a sigh of relief. He had found a refuge of a kind.

He meant to sleep, but he could not, for all his nerves were tense with excitement. Not a sound in the house escaped him. He heard the soft ashes sink on the hearth; he heard one of the men who slept in the hall turn and moan in his sleep. At last, quite close to him, a door opened.

Jehan moved a little and peered from his ambush. The noise had come from madame's room. He was not surprised when he saw her face thrust out. Presently she put the curtain quite aside and came out, and stood a little way from him, listening intently. She wore a loose robe of some soft stuff, and he fancied she was barefoot, for she moved without noise.

She stood listening a full minute, with her hand to her bosom. Then she nodded, as if assured that all was well, and, going to the table, looked down at the things it held. Her face wore a subtle smile, her cheeks flamed softly, there was a shy sparkle in her eyes. The lamp seemed to lend her new loveliness.

Apparently she did not find what she wanted on the table, for in a moment she turned and went to the fireplace. She took the posset from the trivet, and, lifting the lid of the cup, looked in. What she saw appeared to satisfy her, for with a quick movement she carried the cup to the table and set it down open. She had her back to Jehan now, and he could not see what she was doing, though he watched her every motion and partly guessed. When she had finished whatever it was, she raised the cup to her lips, and the boy's heart stood still. Ay, stood still! He half rose, his face white. But he was in error. She only kissed the wine and covered it, and took it back to the trivet, murmuring something over it as she set it down.

"HE WATCHED HER EVERY MOTION" (*p* 124.)

The boy lay still, like one fascinated, while madame, clasping two little silk bags to her bosom, stole back to her door. As she raised the curtain with one hand she turned on a sudden impulse and kissed the other towards the hearth. Slowly the curtain fell and hid her shining eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

CLYTÆMNESTRA.

She had barely disappeared when the boy, listening eagerly, heard the great door below flung open, and instinctively sank down again. A breath of cold air rose from below. A harsh voice—a voice he knew—cursed someone or something in the hall, a heavy step came stumbling up the stairs, and in a moment M. de Vidoche, followed by a sleepy servant, pushed his way through the curtains. He was flushed with drink, yet he was not drunk, for as he crossed the floor he shot a swift sidelong glance at his wife's door—a glance of dark meaning; and, though he railed savagely at the servant for letting the fire go out, he had the air of listening while he spoke, and swore, to show himself at ease.

The man muttered some excuse, and, kneeling, began to blow the embers, while

Vidoche looked on moodily. He had not taken off his hat and cloak. "Has madame been out this evening?" he said suddenly.

"No, my lord."

"Her woman is lying with her?"

"Yes, my lord."

A moment's silence. Then, "Trim the lamp, curse you! Don't you see it is going out? Do you want to leave me in the dark? *Sacré!* This might be a pigsty from the way it is kept!"

The man was used to be kicked and abused, but it seemed to him that his master's caprices were taking a fresh direction. It was not his business to think, however. He trimmed the lamp and took the cloak and hat, and was going, when Vidoche called him back again. "Put on a log," he said, "and give me that drink. *Nom du diable*, it is cold! You lazy hound, you have been sleeping!"

The man vowed he had not, and M. de Vidoche listened to his protestations as if he heard them. In reality his thoughts were

busy with other things. Would it be to-night, or to-morrow, or the next day? he was wondering darkly. And how would it —take her? Would he be there, or would they come and tell him? Would she sicken and fade slowly, and die of some common illness to all appearance, with the priest by her side? Or would he awake in the night to hear her screaming, and be summoned to see her writhing in torture, gasping, choking, praying them to save—to save her from this horrible pain? God! The perspiration broke out on his brow. He shivered. "Give me that!" he muttered hoarsely, holding out a shaking hand. "Give it me, I say!"

The man was warming the posset, but he rose hastily and handed it.

"Put lights in my room! And, hark you—you will sleep there to-night. I am not well. Go and get your straw, and be quick about it."

Vidoche listened with the cup in his hand while the man went down and fetched a taper and some coverings from the hall, and,

coming up again, opened one of the doors on the right—not the one against which the boy lay. The servant went into the room and busied himself there for a time, while the master sat crouching over the fire, thinking, with a gloomy face. He tried to turn his thoughts to the Farincourt, and to what would happen afterwards, and to a dozen things with which his mind had been only too ready to occupy itself of late. But now his thoughts would not be ordered. They returned again and again to the door on his left. He caught himself listening, waiting, glancing at it askance. And this might go on for days. *Dieu!* the house would be a hell! He would go away. He would make some excuse to leave until—until after Christmas.

He shivered, cursed himself under his breath for a fool, and drank half the mulled wine at a draught. As he took the cup from his lips, his ear caught a slight sound behind him, and, starting, he peered hastily over his shoulder. But the noise came apparently from the next room, where the servant was

moving about; and, with another oath, Vidoche drained the cup and set it down on the table.

He had scarcely done so when he drew himself suddenly upright and remained in that position for a moment, his mouth half open, his eyes glaring. A kind of spasm seized him. His teeth shut with a click. He staggered and clutched at the table. His face grew red—purple. His brain seemed to be bursting; his eyes filled with blood. He tried to cry, to give the alarm, to get breath, but his throat was held in an iron vice. He was choking and reeling on his feet, when the man came by chance out of the bedroom.

By a tremendous effort Vidoche spoke. "Who—made—this?" he muttered, in a hissing voice.

The servant started, scared by his appearance. He answered, nevertheless, that he had mixed it himself.

"Look at—the bottom of—the cup!" Vidoche replied in a terrible voice. He was swaying to and fro, and kept himself up only

by his grip on the table. "Is there—anything there?"

The servant was terribly frightened, but he had the sense to obey. He took up the cup and looked in it. "Is there—a powder—in it?" Vidoche asked, a frightful spasm distorting his features.

"There is—something," the man answered, his teeth chattering. "But let me fetch help, my lord. You are not well. You are——"

"A dead man!" the baffled murderer cried, his voice rising in a scream of indescribable despair and horror. "A dead man! I am poisoned! My wife!" He reeled with that word. He lost his hold of the table. "Ha, *mon Dieu!* Mercy! Mercy!" he cried.

In a moment he was down, writhing on the floor, and uttering shriek on shriek: cries so dreadful that on the instant doors flew open and sleepers awoke, and in a twinkling the room—though the lamp lay quenched, overturned in his struggles—was full of lights and frightened faces and huddled

forms, and women who stopped their ears and wept. The doorways framed more faces, the staircase rang with sounds of alarm. Everywhere was turmoil and a madness of hurrying feet. One ran for the doctor, another for the priest, a third for the watch. The house seemed on a sudden alive; nay, the very courtyard, where the porter was gone from his post, and the doors stood open, was full of staring strangers, who gaped at the windows and the hurrying lights, and asked whose was the hotel, or answered it was M. de Vidoche's.

It had been. But already the man who had gone up the stairs so full of strength and evil purpose lay dying, speechless, all but dead. They had lifted him on to a pallet which someone drew from a neighbouring room, and at first there had been no lack of helpers or ready hands. One untied his cravat, and another his doublet, and two or three of the coolest held him in his paroxysms. But then the magic word "Poison!" was whispered; and one by one, all, even the man who had been with him,

"IN A MOMENT HE WAS DOWN, WRITHING ON THE FLOOR" (*p.* 133).

even madame's woman, drew off, and left those two alone. The livid body lay on the pallet, and madame, stunned and horror-stricken, hung over it; but the servants stood away in a dense circle, and looking on with gloom and fear in their faces, some mechanically holding lights, some still grasping the bowls and basins they were afraid to use, whispered that word again and again.

It seemed as if the tell-tale syllables passed the walls; for the first to arrive, before doctor or priest, was the captain of the watch. He came upstairs, his sword clanking, and, thrusting the curtains aside, stood looking at the strange scene, which the many lights, irregularly held and distributed, lit up as if it had been a pageant on the stage. "Who is it?" he muttered, touching the nearest servant on the arm.

"M. de Vidoche," the man answered.

"Is he dead?"

The man cringed before him. "Dead, or as good," he whispered. "Yes, sir."

"Then he is not dead?"

"I do not know, sir."

"Then why the devil are you all standing like mutes at a funeral?" the soldier answered, with an oath. "Leaving madame alone, too. Poison, eh? Oh!" and he whistled softly. "So that is why you are all looking on as if the man had got the plague, is it? A pretty set of curs you are! But here is the doctor. Out of the way now," he added contemptuously, "and let no one leave the room."

He went forward with the physician, and, while the latter knelt and made his examination, the captain muttered a few words of comfort in madame's ear. For all she heard or heeded, however, he might have spared his pains. She had been summoned so abruptly, and the call had so entirely snapped the thread of her thoughts, that she had not yet connected her husband's illness with any act of hers. She had absolutely forgotten the enterprise of the evening, its anticipations and hopes. For the time she was spared that horror. But this illness alone sufficed to overwhelm her,

to sink her beyond the reach of present comfort. She no longer remembered her husband's coldness, but only the early days when he had come to her in her country home, a black-bearded, bold-eyed Apollo, and wooed her impetuously and with irresistible will. All his faults, all his unkindnesses, were forgotten now: only his beauty, his vigour, his great passion, his courage were remembered. A dreadful pain seized her heart when she recognised that his had ceased to beat. She peered white-faced into the physician's eyes, she hung on his lips. If she remembered her journey to the Rue Touchet at all, it was only to think how futile her hopes were now. He, whom she would have won back to her, was gone from her for ever!

The doctor shook his head gravely as he rose. He had tried to bleed the patient, without waiting, in this emergency, for a barber to be summoned; but the blood would not flow. "It is useless," he said. "You must have courage, madame. More courage than is commonly required," he

continued, in a tone of solemnity, almost of severity. He looked round and met the captain's eyes. He made him a slight sign.

"He is dead?" she muttered.

"He is dead," the physician answered slowly. "More, madame—my task goes farther. It is my duty to say that he has been poisoned."

"Dead!" she muttered, with a dry sob. "Dead!"

"Poisoned, I said, madame," the physician answered almost harshly. "In an older man the symptoms might be taken for those of apoplexy. But in this case not so. M. de Vidoche has been poisoned."

"You are clear on the point?" the captain of the watch said. He was a grey-haired, elderly man, lately transferred from the field to the slums of Paris, and his kindly nature had not been wholly obliterated by contact with villainy.

"Perfectly," the doctor answered. "More, the poison must have been administered within the hour."

Madame rose shivering from the dead

man's side. This new terror, so much worse than that of death, seemed to thrust her from him, to raise a barrier between them. The soft white robe she had thrown round her when she ran from her bed was not whiter than her cheeks; the lights were not brighter than her eyes, distended with horror. "Poisoned!" she muttered. "Impossible! Who would poison him?"

"That is the question, madame," the captain of the watch answered, not without pity—not without admiration. "And if, as we are told, the poison must have been given within the hour, it should not be difficult to answer it. Let no one leave the room," he continued, pulling his moustachios. "Where is the valet who waited on M. de Vidoche?"

The man stood forward from the rest, shaking with alarm, and told briefly all he knew; how he had left his master in his usual health, and found him in some kind of seizure; how Vidoche had bidden him look in the cup, and how he had found a sediment in it which should not have been there.

"You mixed this wine yourself?" the captain of the watch said sharply.

The man allowed he had, whimpering and excusing himself.

"Very well. Let me see madame's woman," was the answer. "Which is she? She is here, I suppose. Let her stand out."

A dozen hands were ready to point her out, a dozen lights were held up that the Chevalier du Guet might see her the better. She was pushed, nudged, impelled forward, until she stood trembling where the man had stood. But not for long. The captain's first question was still on his lips when, with a sudden gesture of despair, the woman threw herself on her knees before him, and, grovelling in a state of abject terror, cried out that she would tell all—all! All if they would let her go! All if they would not torture her!

The captain's face grew stern, the lines about his mouth hardened. "Speak!" he said curtly, and with a swift side-glance at the mistress, who stood as if turned to stone. "Speak, but the truth only, woman!" while a

murmur of astonishment and fear ran round the circle.

It should be mentioned that at this time the crime of secret poisoning was held in especial abhorrence in France, the poisoning of husbands by wives more particularly. It was believed to be common; it was suspected in many cases where it could not be proved. Men felt themselves at the mercy of women who, sharing their bed and board, had often the motive and always the opportunity; and in proportion as the crime was easy of commission and difficult to detect was the rigour with which it was rewarded when detected. The high rank of the Princess of Condé—a Tremouille by birth and a Bourbon by marriage—did not avail to save her from torture when suspected of this; while the sudden death of a man of position was often sufficient to expose his servants, and particularly his wife's confidante, to the horrors of the question. Madame's woman knew all this. Such things formed the gossip of her class, and in a paroxysm of fear, in terror, in dread lest the moment should pass and

another forestall her, she flung both fidelity and prudence to the winds.

"I will! I will! All!" she cried. "And I swear it is true! She went to a house in the Tournelles quarter to-night!"

"She? Who is she, woman?" the captain asked sharply.

"My lady there! She stayed an hour. I waited outside. As we came back a boy ran after us, and talked with her by the porch of St. Gervais. She sent me away, and I do not know what was his business. But after we got home, and when she thought me asleep, she crept out of the room and came here, and put something in that cup. I heard her go, and stole to the door, and through the curtains saw her do it, but I did not know what it was, or what she intended. I have told the truth. But I did not know, I did not! I swear I did not!"

The captain silenced her protestations with a fierce gesture, and turned from her to the woman she accused. "Madame," he said, in a low, unsteady voice, "is this true?"

She stood with both her hands on her

breast, and looked, with a face of stone, not at him, but beyond him. She scarcely seemed to breathe, so perfect was the dreadful stillness which held her. He thought she did not hear: and he was about to repeat his question when she moved her lips in a strange, mechanical fashion, and, after an effort, spoke. "Is it true?" she whispered—in that stricken silence every syllable was audible, and even at her first word some women fell to shuddering—"is it true that I have killed my husband? Yes, I have killed him. I loved him, and I have killed him. I loved him—I had no one else to love—and I have killed him. God has let this be in this world. You are real, and I am real. It is no dream. He has let it be."

"*Mon Dieu!*" the captain muttered, while one woman broke into noisy weeping. "She is mad!"

But madame was not mad, or only mad for the moment. "It is strange," she continued, with writhing lips, but in the same even tone—which to those who had ears

to hear was worse than any loud outcry—"that such a thing should be. God should not let it be, because I loved him. I loved him, and I have killed him. I—but perhaps I shall awake presently and find it a dream. Or perhaps he is not dead. Is he? Ha! is he, man? Tell me!"

With the last words, which leapt from her lips in sudden frantic questioning, she awoke as from a trance. She sprang towards the doctor; then, turning swiftly, looked where the corpse lay, and with a dreadful peal of laughter threw herself upon it. Her shrill cries so filled the air, so rang through the empty hall below, so pierced the brain, that the captain raised his hands to his ears, and the men shrank back, looking at the women.

"See to her!" said the captain, stamping his foot in a rage and addressing the physician. "I must take her away, but I cannot take her like this. See to her, man. Give her something; drug her, poison her, if you like—anything to stop her! Her cries will ring in my ears a twelvemonth hence.

Well, woman, what is it?" he continued impatiently. Madame's woman had touched his arm.

"The boy!" she muttered. "The boy!" Her teeth were chattering with terror. She pointed to the place where the servants stood most thickly near the great curtains which shut off the staircase.

He followed the direction of her hand, but saw nothing except scared faces and cringing figures. "What boy, woman?" he retorted. "What do you mean?"

"The boy who came after us to the church," she answered. "I saw him a minute ago—there! He was standing behind that man, looking under his arm."

Three strides brought the captain of the watch to the place indicated. But there was no boy there—there was no boy to be seen. Moreover, the frightened servants who stood in that part declared that they had seen no boy—that no boy could have been there. The captain, believing that they had had eyes only for Madame de Vidoche, put small faith in their protestations; but the fact

remained that the boy was gone, and the searcher returned baffled and perplexed: more than half inclined to think that this might be a ruse on the woman's part, yet at a loss to see what good it could do her. He asked her roughly how old the boy was.

"About twelve," she answered, looking nervously over her shoulder. In truth, she began to fancy that the boy was a familiar. Or what could bring him here? How had he entered? And whither had he vanished?

"How was he dressed?" the captain asked angrily, waving back the servants, who would have pressed on him in their curiosity.

"In black velvet," she answered. "But he had no cap. He was bareheaded. And I noticed that he had black hair and blue eyes."

"Are you sure that the boy you saw here was the boy who followed you and spoke to madame in the street?" he urged. "Be careful, woman!"

"I am certain of it," she answered feverishly. "I knew him in a moment."

"Are you sure that madame did not bring him in with you?"

She vowed positively that she had not, and equally positively that the boy could not have followed them in without being seen. In this we know that she was mistaken; but she believed it, and her belief communicated itself to her questioner.

He rubbed his head with his hand in extreme perplexity. If the boy were a messenger from the villain whom this wretched woman had been to visit, what could have brought him to the house? Why had he risked himself on the scene of the murder? Unless—unless, indeed, his mission were to learn what happened, and to warn his master!

The captain caught that in a moment, and, thrusting the servants on one side, despatched three or four men on the instant to the Rue Touchet. "*Pardieu!*" he exclaimed, wiping his forehead when they were gone, "I was nearly forgetting him. The villain! I will be sworn he tempted her! But now I think I have netted all—

madame, the maid, the man, the devil!" He ticked them off on his fingers. "There is only the lad wanting. The odds are they will get him, too, in the Rue Touchet. So far, so good. But it is hateful work," the old soldier continued, with an oath, looking askance at the group which surrounded madame and the doctor. "They will—ugh! it is horrible. It would be a mercy to give her a dose now, and end all."

But there was no one to take the responsibility, and so the few who were abroad very early that morning saw a strange and mournful procession pass through the streets of Paris; those streets which have seen so many grisly and so many fantastic things. An hour before daybreak a litter, surrounded by a crowd of armed men, some bearing torches and some pikes and halberds, came out of the Hotel Vidoche and passed slowly down the Rue St. Denis. The night was at its darkest, the wind at its keenest. Vagrant wretches, lying out in the Halles, rose up and walked for their lives, or slowly froze and perished.

But there are worse things than death in the open; worse, at any rate, than that death which comes with kindly numbing power. And some of these knew it; nay, all. The poorest outcast whom the glare of the cressets surprised as he lurked in porch or penthouse, the leanest beggar who looked out startled by the clang and tramp, knew himself happier than the king's prisoner bound for the Châtelet; and, hugging his rags, thanked Heaven for it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MARK OF CAIN.

WHEN Jehan, in a fever of indignation, slipped stealthily out of the house in the Rue Touchet and sped up the dark, quiet street after Madame de Vidoche, he had no subtler purpose in his mind than to overtake her and warn her. The lady had spoken kindly to him on the night of the supper at Les Andelys. She was young, weak, oppressed; the plot against her seemed to the child to be fiendish in its artfulness. It needed no more to rouse every chivalrous instinct in his nature—and these in a boy should be many, or woe betide the man—and determine him to save her.

He thought that if he could overtake her and warn her all would be well; and at first his purpose went no farther than that. But as he ran, now looking over

his shoulder in terror, and now peering into the darkness ahead, sometimes slipping into the gutter in his haste, and sometimes stumbling over a projecting step, a new and whimsical thought flashed into his mind, and in a moment fascinated him. How it came to one so young, whether the astrologer's duplicity, to which he had been a witness, suggested it, or it sprang from some precocious aptitude in the boy's own nature, it is impossible to say. But on a sudden there it was in his mind, full-grown, full-armed, a perfect scheme. He had only a few minutes in which to consider it before he caught madame up, and the time to put it into execution came; but in that interval he found no flaw in it. Rather he revelled in it. It satisfied the boy's stern sense of retribution and justice. It more than satisfied the boy's love of mischief and trickery.

He felt not the slightest misgiving, therefore, when it came to playing his part. He went through it without pity, without a scruple or thought of responsibility

—nay, he followed madame home, and hid himself behind the curtain, with no feeling of apprehension as to what was coming, with no qualms of conscience.

But when he had seen all, and lying spell-bound in his hiding-place had witnessed the tragedy, when covering his ears with his hands, and cowering down as if he would cower through the floor, he had heard Vidoche's death-cry and winced at each syllable of madame's heart-broken utterance —when, with quaking limbs and white cheeks, he had crept at last down the stairs and fled from the accursed house, then the boy knew all; knew what he had done, and was horror-stricken! Even the darkness and freezing cold were welcome, if he might escape from that house—if he might leave those haunting cries behind. But how? by what road? He fled through street after street, alley after alley, over bridges, and along quays, by the doors of churches and the gates of prisons. But everywhere the sights and sounds went with him, forestalled him, followed him. He

could not forget. When at last, utterly exhausted, he flung himself down on a pile of refuse in a distant corner of the Halles, his heart seemed bursting. He had killed a man. He had worse than killed a woman. He would be hung. The astrologer had told him truly; he was doomed, given up to evil and the devil!

He lay for a long time panting and shuddering, with his face hidden; while a burst of agony, provoked by some sudden pang of remembrance, now and again racked his frame. The spot he had, almost unconsciously, chosen for his hiding-place was a corner between two stalls, at the east end of the market: an angle well sheltered from the wind, and piled breast-high with porters' knots and rubbish. The air was a little less bitter there than outside; and by good fortune he had thrown himself down on an old sack, which he, by-and-bye, drew over him. Otherwise he must have perished. As it was, he presently sobbed himself into an uneasy slumber; but only to awake in a few minutes with a scream of

affright and a dismal return of all his apprehensions.

Still, nature was already at work to console him; and misery sleeps proverbially well. After a time he dozed again for a few minutes, and then again. At length, a little before daybreak, he went off into a sounder sleep, from which he did not awake until the wintry sun was nearly an hour up, and old-fashioned people were thinking of dinner.

After opening his eyes, he lay a while between sleeping and waking, with the sense of some unknown trouble heavy upon him. On a sudden a voice, a harsh, rasping voice, speaking a strange clipped jargon, roused him effectually. "He is a runaway!" the voice said, with two or three unnecessary oaths. "A crown to a penny on it, my bully-boys! Well, it is an ill-wind blows no one any good. Rouse up the little shaveling, will you? That is not the way! Here, lend it me."

The next moment the boy sat up, with a cry of pain, for a heavy porter's knot fell on

his shin-bone and nearly broke it. He found himself confronted by three or four grinning ruffians, whose eyes glistened as they scanned his velvet clothes and the little silver buttons that fastened them. The man who had spoken before seemed to be the leader of the party: a filthy beggar with one arm and a hare-lip. "Ho! ho!" he chuckled; "so you can feel, M. le Marquis, can you! Flesh and blood like other folk. And doubtless with money in your pockets to pay for your night's lodging."

He hauled the child to him and passed his hands through his clothes. But he found nothing, and his face grew dark. "*Morbleu!*" he swore. "The little softy has brought nothing away with him!"

The other men, gathering round, glared at the boy hungrily. In the middle of the Forest of Bondy he could not have been more at their mercy than he was in this quiet corner of the market, where a velvet coat with silver buttons was as rare a sight as a piece of the true cross. Two or three houseless wretches looked on from their frowsy lairs under the

stalls, but no one dreamed of interfering with the men in possession. As for the boy, he gazed at his captors stolidly; he was white, mute, apathetic.

"Plague, if I don't think the lad *is* a softy!" said one, staring at him.

"Not he!" replied the man who had hold of him. And roughly seizing the boy by the head with his huge hand, he forced up an eyelid with his finger as if to examine the eye. The boy uttered a cry of pain. "There!" said the ruffian, grinning with triumph. "He is all right. The question is, what shall we do with him?"

"There are his clothes," one muttered, eyeing the boy greedily.

"To be sure, there are always his clothes," was the answer. "It does not take an Armand Jean du Plessis de Richelieu to see that, gaby! And, of course, they would melt to the tune of something apiece! But maybe we can do better than that with him. He has run away. You don't find truffles on the dung-hill every day."

"Well," said his duller fellows, their eyes

beginning to sparkle with greed, "what then, Bec de Lièvre?"

"If we take him home again, honest market porters, why should we not be rewarded? Eh, my bully-boys?"

"That is a bright idea!" said one. So said another. The rest nodded. "Ask him where he lives, when he is at home."

They did. But Jehan remained mute. "Twist his arm!" said the last speaker. "He will soon tell you. Or stick your finger in his eye again! Blest if I don't think the kid *is* dumb!" the man continued, gazing with astonishment at the boy's dull face and lack-lustre eyes.

"I think I shall find a tongue for him," the former operator replied with a leer. "Here, sonny, answer before you are hurt, will you? Where do you live?"

But Jehan remained silent. The ruffian raised his hand. In another moment it would have fallen, but in the nick of time came an interruption. "Nom de ma mère!" someone close at hand cried, in a voice of astonishment. "It is my Jehan!"

Two of the party in possession turned savagely on the intruder—a middle-sized man with foxy eyes, and a half-starved ape on his shoulder. "Who asked you to speak?" snarled one. "Begone about your business, my fine fellow, or I shall be making a hole in you!" cried another.

"But he is my boy!" the new-comer answered, fairly trembling with joy and astonishment. "He is my boy!"

"Your boy?" cried Bec de Lièvre, in a tone of contempt. "You look like it, don't you? You look as if you dined on gold plate every day and had a Rohan to your cup-bearer, you do! Go along, man; don't try to bamboozle us, or it will be the worse for you!" And with an angry scowl he turned to his victim.

But the showman, though he was a coward, was not to be put down so easily. "It is the boy who is bamboozling you!" he said. "You take him for a swell! It is only his show dress he has on. He is a tumbler's boy, I tell you. He circled the pole with me for two years. Last November

he ran away. If you do not believe me, ask the monkey. See, the monkey knows him."

Bec de Lièvre had to acknowledge that the monkey did know him. For the poor beast was no sooner brought close to its old playmate than it sprang upon him and covered him with caresses, gibbering and crying out the while after so human a fashion that it might well have moved hearts less hard. The boy did not return its endearments, however; but a look of intelligence came into his eyes, and on a sudden he heaved a sigh as if his heart was breaking.

The men who had taken possession of him looked at one another. "It was the boy's cursed clothes fooled us," Bec de Lièvre growled savagely. "We will have them, at any rate. Strip him and have done with it. And do you keep off, Master Tumbler, or we will tumble you."

But when the showman, who was trembling with delight and anticipation, made them understand that he would give a crown for the boy as he was in his clothes—"and

that is more than the fence will give you," he added—they began to see reason. True, they stood out for a while for a higher price; but the bargain was eventually struck at a crown and a livre, and the boy handed over.

Master Crafty Eyes' hand shook as he laid it on the child's collar and turned him round so that he might see his face the better. Bec de Lièvre discerned the man's excitement, and looked at him curiously. "You must be very fond of the lad," he said.

The showman's eyes glittered ferociously. "So fond of him," he said, in a mocking tone, "that when I get him home I shall—oh, I shall not hurt his fine clothes, or his face, or his little brown hands, for those all show, and they are worth money to me. But I shall—I shall put a poker in the fire, and then Master Jehan will take off his new clothes so that they may not be singed, and—I shall teach him several new tricks with the poker."

"You are a queer one," the other

answered. "I'll be shot if you don't look like a man with a good dinner before him."

"That is the man I am," the showman answered, a hideous smile distorting his face. "I have gone without dinner or supper many a day because my little friend here chose to run away one fine night, when he was on the point of making my fortune. But I am going to dine now. I am going to feed—on him!"

"Well, every man to his liking," the hare-lipped beggar answered indifferently. "You have paid for your dinner, and may cook it as you please, for me."

"I am going to," the showman answered, with an ugly look. He plucked the boy almost off his feet as he spoke, and while the men cried after him "*Bon appétit!*" and jeered, dragged him away across the open part of the market; finally disappearing with him in one of the noisome alleys which then led out of the Halles on the east side.

His way lay through a rabbit-warren of beetling passages and narrow lanes, where the boy, once loose, could have dodged

him a hundred ways and escaped; and he held him with the utmost precaution, expecting him every moment to make a desperate attempt at it. But Jehan was not the old Jehan who had turned and twisted, walked and frolicked on the rope, and in the utmost depths of ill-treatment had still kept teeth to bite and spirit to use them. He was benumbed body and soul. He had had no food for nearly twenty hours. He had passed the night exposed to the cold. He had gone through intense excitement, horror, despair. So he stumbled along, with Vidoche's dying cries in his ears, and, famished, frozen, bemused, met the showman's threats with a face of fixed, impassive apathy. He was within a very little of madness.

For a time Crafty Eyes did not heed this strange impassiveness. The showman's fancy was busy with the punishment he would inflict when he got the boy home to his miserable room. He gloated in anticipation over the tortures he would contrive, and the care he would take that they should not maim or disfigure the boy. When he had

him tied down, and the door locked, and the poker heated—ah! how he would enjoy himself! The ruffian licked his lips. His eyes sparkled with pleasure. He jerked the boy along in his hideous impatience.

But after a time the child's bearing began to annoy him. He stopped and, holding him with one hand, beat him brutally on the head with the other, until the boy fell and hung in his grasp. Then he dragged him up roughly and hauled him on with volleys of oaths; still scowling at him from time to time, as if, somehow, he found this little foretaste of vengeance less satisfying than he had expected.

There were people coming and going in the dark filthy lane where this happened—a place where smoke-grimed gables almost met overhead, and the gutter was choked with refuse—but no one interfered. What was a little beating more or less? Or, for the matter of that, what was a boy more or less? The hulking loafers and frowsy slatterns, who huddled for warmth in corners, nodded their heads and looked on approvingly.

They had their own brats to beat and business to mind. There was no one to take the boy's part. And another hundred yards would lodge him in the showman's garret.

At that last moment the boy awoke from his trance and understood; and in a convulsion of fear hung back and struggled, screaming and throwing himself down. The man dragged him up savagely, and was in the act of taking him up bodily to carry him, when a person, who had already passed the pair once, came back and looked at the boy again. The next moment a hand fell on the showman's arm, and a voice said, "Stop! What boy is that?"

The showman looked up, saw that the intervener was a priest, and sneered. "What is that to you, father?" he said, trying by a side movement to pass by. "Not one of your flock, at any rate."

"No, but you are!" the priest retorted in a strangely sonorous voice. He was a stalwart man, with a mobile face and sad eyes that seemed out of keeping with the

rest of him. "You are! And if you do not this minute set him down and answer my question, you ruffian, when your time comes you shall go to the tree alone!"

"Diable!" the showman muttered, startled yet scowling. "Who are you, then?"

"I am Father Bernard. Now tell me about that boy, and truly. What have you been doing to him? Ay, you may well tremble, rascal!"

For the showman was trembling. In the Paris of that day the name of Father Bernard was almost as well known as the name of Cardinal Richelieu. There was not a night-prowler or cutpurse, bully or swindler, who did not know it, and dream in his low fits, when the drink was out and the money spent, of the day when he would travel by Father Bernard's side to Montfaucon, and find no other voice and no other eye to pity him in his trouble. Impelled by feelings of humanity, rare at that time, this man made it his life-work to attend on all who were cast for execution; to wait on them in prison, and

be with them at the last, and by his presence and words of comfort to alleviate their sufferings here, and bring them to a better mind. He had become so well known in this course of work that the king himself did him honour, and the Cardinal granted him special rights. The mob also. The priest passed unharmed through the lowest wynds of Paris, and penetrated habitually to places where the Lieutenant of the Châtelet, with a dozen pikes at his back, would not have been safe for a moment.

This was the man whose stern voice brought the showman to a standstill. Master Crafty Eyes faltered. Then he remembered that the boy was his boy, that his title to him was good. He said so sulkily.

"Your boy?" the priest replied, frowning. "Who are you, then?"

"An acrobat, father."

"So I thought. But do acrobats' boys wear black velvet clothes with silver buttons?"

"He was stolen from me," the showman answered eagerly. He had a good

conscience as to the clothes. "I have only just recovered him, father."

"Who stole him? Where has he been?" The priest spoke quickly, and with no little excitement. He looked narrowly at the boy the while, holding him at arm's length. "Where did he spend last night, for instance?"

The showman spread out his palms and shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know?" he said. "I was not with him."

"He has black hair and blue eyes!"

"Yes. But what of that?" Crafty Eyes answered. "I can swear to him. He is my boy."

"And mine!" Father Bernard retorted with energy. "The boy I want!" The priest's eyes sparkled, his form seemed to dilate with triumph. "Deo laus! Deo laus!" he murmured sonorously, so that a score of loiterers who had gathered round, and were staring and shivering by turns, fell back affrighted and crossed themselves. "He is the boy! God has put him in my way this day as clearly as if an angel had led

me by the hand. And he goes with me; he goes with me. Chut, man!"—this to the showman, who stood frowning in his path—"don't dare to look black at me. The boy goes with me, I say. I want him for a purpose. If you choose you can come too."

"Whither?"

"To the Châtelet," Father Bernard answered, with a grim chuckle. "You don't seem to relish the idea. But do as you please."

"You will take the boy?"

"This moment," the priest answered.

"*Mon Dieu!* but you shall not!" the showman exclaimed. Wrath for the moment drove out fear. He seized the child by the arm. "He is my boy! You shall not, I say!" he cried, almost foaming with rage. "He is mine!"

"Idiot! Beast! Gallows-bird!" the priest thundered in reply. "For one-half of a denier I would throw you into the next street! Let go, or I will blast you with—Oh, it is well for you you are reasonable.

"'WHO STOLE HIM? WHERE HAS HE BEEN?'" (*p.* 169).

Now begone! Begone! or, at a word from me, there are a score here will——"

He did not finish his sentence, for the showman fell back panic-stricken, and stood off among the crowd, malevolence and craven fear struggling for the mastery in his countenance. The priest took the boy up gently in his arms and looked at him. His face grew strangely mild as he did so. The black brows grew smooth, the lips relaxed. "Get a little water," he said to the nearest man, a hulking, olive-skinned Southerner. "The child has swooned."

"Your pardon, father," the man answered. "He is dead."

But Father Bernard shook his head. "No, my son," he said kindly. "He who led me here to-day will keep life in him a little longer. God's ways never end in a *cul-de-sac*. Get the water. He has swooned only."

CHAPTER IX.

BEFORE THE COURT.

SINCE the poisoning of the Prince of Condé by his servant, Brillaut, at the instigation—as was alleged and commonly believed—of Madame la Princesse, no tragedy of the kind had caused a greater sensation in Paris, or been the subject of more talk, than the murder of M. de Vidoche. The remarkable circumstances which attended it—and which lost nothing in the narration—its immediate discovery, the apparent lack of motive, and the wealth, rank, and youth of the guilty wife, all helped, with the fulness of Paris at this time and the absence of any stirring political news, to make it the one topic of interest. Nothing else was talked of in chamber or tennis court, in the Grand Gallery at the Louvre, or in the cardinal's ante-room at the Palais Richelieu. Culprit and victim were alike well known. M. de

Vidoche, if no favourite, had been at least a conspicuous figure in society. He had been cast for one of the parts in the royal troupe at the Christmas carnival. His flirtation with Mademoiselle de Farincourt had been sufficiently marked to cause both amusement and interest. And if madame was a less familiar figure at Court, if she had a reputation somewhat prudish, and an air of rusticity that did not belie it, and was even less of a favourite than her husband, her position as a great heiress and the last of an old family gave her a *cachet* which did not fail to make her interesting now.

Gladly would the great ladies in their coaches have gone down to the Châtelet to stare at her after the cruel fashion of that day; and, after buzzing round her in her misery, have gone away with a hundred tales of how she looked, and what she wore, and what she said in prison. But madame was saved this—this torture worse than the question—by the physician's order that no one should be admitted to her. He laid this down so strenuously—telling the lieutenant

that if she had not complete repose for twenty-four hours he would be answerable neither for her life nor her reason—that that officer, who, like the Chevalier du Guet, was an old soldier, replied "No" to the most pressing insistences; and save and except Father Bernard, who had the *entrée* at all hours by the king's command, would let no one go in to her. "It will be bad enough by-and-bye," he said, with an oath. "If she did it, she will be punished. But she shall have a little peace to-day."

But the great world, baffled on this point, grew only the more curious; circulated stories only the more outrageous; and nodded and winked and whispered only the more assiduously. Would she be put to the question? And by the rack, or the boot, or the water torture? And who was the man? Of course there was a man. Now if it had been M. de Vidoche who had poisoned *her*, that would have been plain, intelligible, perspicuous; since everyone knew—and so on, and so on, with Mademoiselle de Farincourt's name at intervals.

It was believed that madame would be first examined in private; but late at night, on the day before Christmas Eve, a sealed order came to the Lieutenant of the Châtelet, commanding him to present madame, with her servants and all concerned in the case, at the Palais de Justice on the following morning. Late as it was, the news was known in every part of Paris that night. Marshal Bassompierre, lying in the Bastille, heard it, and regretted he could not see the sight. It was rumoured that the king would attend in person; even that the trial had been hastened for his pleasure. It was certain that half the Court would be there, and the other half, if it could find room. The great ladies, who had failed to storm the Châtelet, hoped to succèed better at the Palais, and the First President of the Court, and even the Commissioners appointed to sit with him, found their doors beset at dawn with delicate "*poulets*," or urgent, importunate applications.

Madame de Vidoche, the man and maid, were brought from the Châtelet to the Con-

ciergerie an hour before daylight—madame in her coach, with her woman, the man on foot. That cold morning ride was such as few, thank God, are called on to endure. To the horrors of anticipation the lost wife, scarcely more than a girl, had to add the misery of retrospection ; to the knowledge of what she had done, a woman's shrinking from the doom that threatened her, from shame and pain and death. But that which she felt perhaps as keenly as anything, as she crouched in a corner of her curtained vehicle and heard the yells which everywhere saluted its appearance, was the sudden sense of loneliness and isolation. True, the Lieutenant sat opposite to her, but his face was hard. She was no longer a woman to him, but a prisoner, a murderess, a poisoner. And the streets were thronged, in spite of the cold and the early hour. On the Pont au Change the people ran beside the coach and strove to get a sight of her, and jeered and sang and shouted. And at the entrance to the Palais, in the room in the Conciergerie where she had to wait, on the staircase to the

court above, everywhere it was the same; all were set so thick with faces—staring, curious faces—that the guards could scarcely make a way for her. But she was cut off from all. She was no longer of them—of things living. Not one said a kind word to her; not one looked sympathy or pity. On a sudden, in a moment, with hundreds gazing at her, she, a delicate woman, found herself a thing apart, unclean, to be shunned. A thing, no longer a person. A prisoner, no longer a woman.

They placed a seat for her, and she sank into it, feeling at first nothing but the shame of being so stared at. But presently she had to rise and be sworn, and then, as she became conscious of other things, as the details of the crowded chamber forced themselves on her attention, and she saw which were the judges, and heard herself called upon to answer the questions that should be put to her, the instinct of self-preservation, the desire to clear herself, to escape and live, took hold of her. A late instinct, for hitherto all her thoughts had been of the man she

had killed—her husband; but the fiercer for that. A burning flush suddenly flamed in her cheeks. Her eyes grew bright, her heart began to beat quickly. She turned giddy.

She knew only of one way in which she could escape; only of one man that could help her; and even while the first judge was in the act of calling upon her, she turned from him and looked round. She looked to the right, to the left, then behind her, for Nôtredame. He, if he told the truth, could clear her! He could say that she had come to him for a charm, and not for poison! And he only! But where was he? There was her woman, trembling and weeping, waiting to be called. There was the valet, pale and frightened. There were twice a hundred indifferent people. But Nôtredame? He was not visible. He was not there. When she had satisfied herself of this, she sank back with a moan of despair. She gave up hope again. A hundred curious eyes saw the colour fade from her cheeks; her eyes grew dull, the whole woman collapsed.

The examination began. She gave her name in a hollow whisper.

It was the practice of that day, and still is, in French courts, to take advantage of any self-betrayal or emotion on the part of the accused person. It is the duty of the judges to observe the prisoner constantly and narrowly; and the First President, on an occasion such as this, was not the man to overlook anything which was visible to the ordinary spectator. Instead, therefore, of pursuing the regular interrogatory he had in his mind, he leaned forward and asked madame what was the matter.

"I wish for the man Solomon Nôtre-dame," Madame de Vidoche answered, rising and speaking in a choking voice.

"That is the man from whom you bought the poison, I think?" the judge answered, affecting to look at his notes.

"Yes, but as a love-philtre—not a poison," madame said in a whisper. "I wish him to be here."

"You wish to be confronted with him?"

"Yes."

"With the man Solomon Nôtredame?"

"Yes."

"Then you shall be, presently," the judge replied, leaning back, and casting a singular glance at his colleagues. "Be satisfied. And now, madame," he continued gravely, as his eyes returned to her, "it is my duty to help you to tell, and your duty to confess frankly, all that you know concerning this matter. Be good enough, therefore, to collect yourself, and answer my questions fully and truly, as you hope for mercy here and hereafter. So you will save yourself pain, and such also as shall examine you; and may best deserve, in the worst case, the king's indulgence."

As he uttered this exhortation madame clung to the bar behind which she stood, and seemed for the moment about to faint, so that the President waited awhile before he proceeded. She looked, indeed, ghostly. Her white face gleamed through the fog—which, rising from the river, was fast filling the chamber—like a face seen for an instant on a wreck through mist and spray and tempest.

Ladies who had known her as an equal, and who now gazed heartlessly down at her from galleries, felt a pleasant thrill of excitement, and whispered that they had not braved the early cold for nothing. There was not a man in the court who did not expect to see her fall.

But there is in women a power of endurance far exceeding that of men. By an immense effort madame regained control over herself. She answered the President's opening questions faintly but clearly; and, being led at once to tell of her visit to Nôtredame, had sufficient sense of her position to dwell plainly on the two facts important to her—that the object of her visit was a love-potion, and not a poison, and that the instructions first given to her were to take it herself. The latter assertion produced a startling impression in the court. It was completely unexpected; and though ninety-nine out of a hundred fancied it the bold invention of a desperate woman, all allowed that it added zest to the case.

Naturally the President pressed her hard

on these points. He strove, both by cajolery and by stating objections, to make her withdraw from them. But she would not. Nor could he entrap her into narrating anything at variance with them. At length he desisted. "Very well, we will leave that," he said; and so subtly had her story gained sympathy for her that the sigh of relief uttered in the court was perfectly audible. "We will pass on, if you please. The boy who overtook you in the street, and, as you say, altered all? Who was he, madame?"

"I do not know."

"You had seen him before?"

"No."

"Did he not open the door at this Nôtre-dame's when you entered the house?"

"No."

"Nor when you left?"

"No."

"How did you know, then, madame, that he came from this abominable person whom you had been visiting?"

"He said he did."

"And do you tell us," the judge retorted,

"that on the mere word of this boy, whom you did not know and had never seen, without the assurance of any token or countersign, you disregarded the man Nôtredame's directions on the most vital point, and, instead of taking this drug yourself, gave it to your husband?"

"I do."

"Without suspecting that it was other than that for which you had asked?"

"Yes."

"Madame," the judge said slowly, "it is incredible." He looked for a moment at his colleagues, as if to collect their opinions. They nodded. He turned to her again. "Do you not see that?" he said almost kindly.

"I do not," madame answered firmly. "It is true."

"Describe the boy, if you please."

"He had—I think he had dark clothes," she answered, faltering for the first time. "He looked about twelve years old."

"Yes," the President said; "go on."

"He had — I could not see any

more," madame muttered faintly. "It was dark."

"And do you expect us to believe this?" the President replied with warmth, real or assumed. "Do you expect us to believe such a story? Or that it was at the instance of this boy only—this boy of whom you knew nothing, whom you cannot describe, whom you had never seen before—that it was at his instance only that you gave this drug to your husband, instead of taking it yourself?"

She reeled slightly, clinging to the bar. The court swam before her. She saw, as he meant her to see, the full hopelessness of her position, the full strength of the case which fate had made against her, her impotence, her helplessness. Yet she forced herself to make an effort. "It is the truth," she said, in a broken voice. "I loved him."

"Ah!" the President replied cynically. He repressed by a gesture a slight disturbance at the rear of the court. "That, of course. It is part of the story. Or why a love-philtre? But do you not see, madame,"

he continued, bending his brows and speaking in the tone he used to common criminals, "that all the wives in Paris might poison their husbands, and when they were found out say 'It was a love-potion,' if you are to escape? No, no; we must have some better tale than that."

She looked at him in terror and shame. "I have no other," she cried wildly. "That is the truth. If you do not believe me, there is Nôtredame. Ask him."

"You applied to be confronted with him some time back," the President answered, looking aside at his colleagues, who nodded. "Is that still your desire?"

She murmured "Yes," with dry lips.

"Then let him be called," the judge answered solemnly. "Let Solomon Nôtre-dame be called and confronted with the accused."

The order was received with a general stir, a movement of curiosity and expectation. Those in the galleries leaned forward to see the better; those at the back stood up. Madame, with her lips parted and her breath

coming quickly—madame, the poor centre of all—gazed with her soul in her eyes towards the door at which she saw others gazing. All for her depended on this man—the man she was about to see. Would he lie and accuse her? Or would he tell the truth and corroborate her story—say, in a word, that she had come for a love-charm, and not for poison? Surely this last? Surely it would be to his interest?

But while she gazed with her soul in her eyes, the door which had been partly opened fell shut again, and disappointed her. At the same moment there was a general movement and rustling round her, an uprising in every part of the chamber. In bewilderment, almost in impatience, she turned towards the judges and found that they had risen too. Then through a door behind them she saw six gentlemen file in, with a flash and sparkle of colour that lit up the sombre bench. The first was the king.

Louis was about thirty-five years old at this time—a dark, sallow man, wearing black, with a wide-leafed hat, in which a costly

diamond secured a plume of white feathers. He carried a walking cane, and saluted the judges as he entered. Three gentlemen—two about the king's age, the third a burly, soldierly man of sixty—followed him, and took their places behind the canopied chair placed for him. The fifth to enter—but he passed behind the judges and took a chair which stood on their left—wore a red robe trimmed with fur, and a small red cap. He was a man of middle height and pale complexion, keen Italian features and bright piercing eyes, and so far was not remarkable. But he had also a coal-black moustache and chin tuft, and milk-white hair; and this contrast won him recognition everywhere. He was Armand Jean du Plessis, Duke and Cardinal Richelieu, soldier, priest, and playwriter, and for sixteen years the ruler of France.

Madame gazed at them with a beating heart, with wild hopes that would rise, despite herself. But, oh God! how coldly their eyes met hers! With what a stony stare! With what curiosity, indifference,

contempt! Alas, they had come for that. They had come to stare. This was their Christmas show—part of their Christmas revels. And she—she was a woman on her trial, a poisoner, a murderess, a vile thing to be questioned, tortured, dragged to a shameful death!

For a moment or two the king talked with the judges. Then he sat back in his chair. The President made a sign, and an usher in a sonorous voice cried, "Solomon Nôtredame! Let Solomon Nôtredame stand forth!"

CHAPTER X.

TWO WITNESSES.

MADAME DE VIDOCHE heard the name and braced herself again, turning towards the door as others turned, and waiting with dry lips and feverish eyes for the man who was to save her—to save her in spite of king and court. Would he never come? The door stood open, remained open. She could see through it the passage with its bare walls and dusky ceiling, and hear in the hushed silence a noise of shuffling feet. Gradually the noise grew louder; though it still seemed a thing by itself, and so distant that in the court where they waited, with every eye expectant, the slightest sound, the lowest whisper was audible. When the usher cried again, "Solomon Nôtredame, stand forward!" more than one glanced at him angrily. He balked their expectation.

Ha! at last! But they were carrying

him! Madame shivered slightly as she watched the four men come slowly along the passage, bearing a chair between them. At the door they stumbled and paused, giving her time to think. They had been racking him, then, and he could not walk; she might have guessed it. Her cheek, white before, became a shade ghastlier, and she clutched the bar with a firmer grip.

They brought him slowly down the three steps and through the narrow passage towards her. The men who carried him blocked her view, but she saw presently that there was something odd about his head. When they set him down, three paces from her, she saw what it was. His face was covered. There was a loose cloth over his head, and he leaned forward in a strange way.

What did it mean? She began to tremble, gazing at him wildly, expecting she knew not what. And he did not move.

Suddenly the President's solemn voice broke the silence. "Madame," he said—but it seemed to her that he was speaking a long

"THEY WERE CARRYING HIM" (*p.* 192).

way off—"here is your witness. You asked to be confronted with him, and the court, hoping that this may be the more merciful way of inducing you to confess your crime, assent to the request. But I warn you that he is a witness not for you, but against you. He has confessed."

For a moment she looked dumbly at the speaker; then her eyes went back to the veiled figure in the chair—it had a horrible attraction for her.

"Unhappy woman," the President continued, in solemn accents, "he has confessed. Will you now, before you look upon him, do likewise?"

She shook her head. She would have denied, protested, cried that she was not guilty; but her throat was parched—she had lost her voice, hope, all. There was a drumming noise in the court; or perhaps it was in her head. It was growing dark, too.

"He has confessed," she heard the President go on—but he was speaking a long, long way off now, and his voice came

to her ears dully—"by executing on himself that punishment which otherwise the law would have imposed. Are you still obstinate? Let the face be uncovered then. Now, wretched woman, look on your accomplice."

Perhaps he spoke in mercy, and to prepare her; for she looked, and did not at once swoon, though the sight of that dead yellow face, with its stony eyes and open mouth, drew shrieks from more than one. The self-poisoner had done his work well. The sombre features wore even in death a cynical grin, the lips a smile of triumph. But this was on the surface. In the glassy eyes, dull and lustreless, lurked—as all saw who gazed closely—a horror; a look of sudden awakening, as if in the moment of dissolution the wicked man had come face to face with judgment; and, triumphant over his earthly foes, had met on the threshold of the dark world a shape that froze the very marrow in his bones.

Grimmest irony that he who had so long sported with the things of death, and traded

on men's fear of it, should himself be brought here dead, to be exposed and gazed at! Of small use now his tricks and chemicals, his dark knowledge and the mystery in which he had wrapped himself. Orcus had him, grim head, black heart and all.

A moment, I have said, madame stared. Then gradually the truth, the hideous truth, came home to her. He was dead! He had killed himself! The horror of it overcame her at last. With a shuddering cry she fell swooning to the floor.

When she came to herself again—after how long an interval she could not tell—and the piled faces and sharp outlines of the court began to shape themselves out of the mist, her first thought, as remembrance returned, was of the ghastly figure in the chair. With an effort—someone was sponging her forehead, and would have restrained her—she turned her head and looked. To her relief it was gone. She sighed, and closing her eyes lay for a time inert, hearing the hum of voices, but paying no attention. But gradually the misery

of her position took hold of her again, and with a faint moan she looked up.

In a moment she fell to trembling and crying softly, for her eyes met those of the woman who stooped over her and read there something new, strange, wonderful—kindness. The woman patted her hand softly, and murmured to her to be still and to listen. She was listening herself between times, and presently madame followed her example.

Dull as her senses still were, she noticed that the king sat forward with an odd keen look on his face, that the judges seemed startled, that even the Cardinal's pale features were slightly flushed. And not one of all had eyes for her. They were looking at a boy who stood at the end of the table, beside a priest. The cold light from a window fell full on his face, and he was speaking. "I listened," she heard him say. "Yes."

"And how long a time elapsed before Madame de Vidoche came?" the President asked, continuing, apparently, an examina-

tion of which she had missed the first part.

"Half an hour, I think," the boy answered, in a clear, bold tone.

"You are sure it was poison he required?"

"I am sure."

"And madame?"

"A love-philtre."

"You heard both interviews?"

"Both."

"You are sure of the arrangement made between Vidoche and this man, of which you have told us? That the poison should be given to madame in the form of a love-philtre? That she might take it herself?"

"I am sure."

"And it was you who ran after Madame de Vidoche and told her that the draught was to be given to her husband instead?"

"Yes."

"Do you acknowledge, then," the President continued slowly, "that it was you who, in fact, killed M. de Vidoche?"

For the first time the boy faltered and stumbled, and looked this way and that as if for a chance of escape. But there was none, and Father Bernard, by laying his hand on his arm, seemed to give him courage. "I do," he answered, in a low tone.

"Why?" the President demanded, with a quick look at his colleagues. He spoke amid an irrepressible murmur of interest. The tale had been told once, but it was a tale that bore telling.

"Because—I heard him plan his wife's death—and I thought it right," the boy stammered, terror growing in his eyes. "I wanted to save her. I did not know. I did not think."

The President looked towards the king, but suddenly from an unexpected quarter came an interruption. Madame rose trembling to her feet and stood grasping the bar before her. Her face passed from white to red, and red to white. Her eyes glittered through her tears. The woman beside her would have held her back, but she would not be restrained. "What is this?" she

panted. "Does he say that my husband was—there?"

"Yes, madame, he does," the President answered indulgently.

"And that he came for poison—for me?"

"He says so, madame."

She looked at him for a moment wildly, then sank back on her stool and began to sob. She had gone through so many emotions; love and death, shame and fear, had so sported with her during the last few days that she could taste nothing to the full now, neither sweet nor bitter. As the dawning of life and hope had left her rather dazed than thankful, so this stab, that a little earlier would have pierced her very heartstrings, did but prick her. Afterwards the thankfulness and the pain—and the healing—might come. But here in the presence of all these people, where so much had happened to her, she could only sob weakly.

The President turned again to the king. Louis nodded, and with a painful effort—for he stammered terribly—spoke. "Who is th-this lad?" he said. "Ask him."

The judge bowed and returned to the witness. "You call yourself Jean de Bault?" he said somewhat roughly. The name, and especially the particle, displeased him.

The boy assented.

"Who are you, then?"

Jehan opened his mouth to answer, but Father Bernard interposed. "Tell His Majesty," he said, "what you told me."

After a moment's hesitation the boy complied, speaking fast, with his face on his breast and a flushed cheek. Nevertheless, in the silence every word reached the ear. "I am Jehan de Bault," he pattered in his treble voice, "seigneur of I know not where, and lord of seventeen lordships in the county of Perigord——" and so on, and so on, through the quaint formula to which we have listened more than once.

Ninety-nine out of a hundred who heard him, heard him with incredulous surprise, and took the tale for a mountebank's patter; though patter, they acknowledged it was of a novel kind, aptly made and well spoken. Two or three of the bolder laughed. There

had been little to laugh at before. The king moved restlessly in his chair, saying, "Pish! Wh-hat is this rubbish? What is he s-saying?"

The President frowned, and taking his cue from the king, was about to rebuke the boy sharply, when one who had not before spoken, but whose voice in an instant produced silence among high and low, intervened. "The tale rings true!" the Cardinal said, in low, suave accents. "But there is no family of Bault in Perigord, is there?"

"With His Majesty's permission, no!" replied a bluff, hearty voice; and therewith the elderly soldier who had come in with the king advanced a pace to the side of his master's chair. "I am of Perigord, and know, your Eminence," he continued. "More. Two months ago I saw this lad—I recognise him now—at the fair of Fécamp. He was differently dressed then, but he had the same tale, except that he did not mention Perigord."

"S-someone has taught it him," said the king.

"Your Majesty is doubtless right," the

President answered obsequiously. Then to the boy he continued, "Speak, boy; who taught it you?"

But Jehan only shook his head and looked puzzled. At last, being pressed, he said, "At Bault, in Perigord."

"There is no such place!" M. de Bresly cried roundly.

Father Bernard looked distressed. He began to repent that he had led the child to tell the tale; he began to fear that it might hurt instead of helping. Perhaps after all he had been too credulous. But again the Cardinal came to the rescue.

"Is there any family in Perigord can boast of three marshals, M. de Bresly?" he asked, in his thin incisive tones.

"None that I know of. Several that can boast of two."

"The blood of Roland?"

M. de Bresly shrugged his shoulders. "It is common to all of us," he said, smiling.

The great Cardinal smiled, too—a flickering, quickly-passing smile. Then he leaned forward and fixed the boy with his fierce

black eyes. "What was your father's name?" he said.

Jehan shook his head, impotently, miserably.

"Where did you live?"

The same result. The king threw himself back and muttered, "It is no good." The President moved in his seat. Some in the galleries began to whisper.

But the Cardinal raised his hand imperiously. "Can you read?" he said.

"No," Jehan murmured.

"Then your arms?" The Cardinal spoke rapidly now, and his face was growing hard. "They were over the gate, over the door, over the fireplace. Think—look back—reflect. What were they?"

For a moment Jehan stared at him in bewilderment, flinching under the gaze of those piercing eyes. Then on a sudden the boy's face grew crimson. He raised his hand eagerly. "*Or, on a mount vert!*" he cried impetuously—and stopped. But presently, in a different voice, he added slowly, "It was a tree—on a hill."

With a swift look of triumph the Cardinal turned to M. de Bresly. "Now," he said, "that belongs to——"

The soldier nodded almost sulkily. "It is Madame de Vidoche's," he said.

"And her name was——"

"Martinbault. Mademoiselle de Martinbault!"

A murmur of astonishment rose from every part of the court. For a moment the King, the Cardinal, the President, M. de Bresly, all were inaudible. The air seemed full of exclamations, questions, answers; it rang with the words, "Bault—Martinbault!" Everywhere people rose to see the boy, or craned forward and slipped with a clattering noise. Etiquette, reverence, even the presence of the king, went for nothing in the rush of excitement. It was long before the ushers could obtain silence, or any get a hearing.

Then M. de Bresly, who looked as much excited as any, and as red in the face, was found to be speaking. "Pardieu, sire, it may be so!" he was heard to say. "It

is true enough, as I now remember. A child was lost in that family about eight years back. But it was at the time of the Rochelle expedition; the province was full of trouble, and M. and Madame de Martinbault were just dead; and little was made of it. All the same, this may be the boy. Nay, it is a thousand to one he is!"

"What is he, then, to M—Madame de V—Vidoche?" the king asked, with an effort. He was vastly excited—for him.

"A brother, sire," M. de Bresly answered.

That word pierced at last through the dulness which wrapped madame's faculties, and had made her impervious to all that had gone before. She rose slowly, listened, looked at the boy—looked with growing wonder, like one awakening from a dream. Possibly in that moment the later years fell from her, and she saw herself again a child—a tall, lanky girl playing in the garden of the old château with a little toddling boy who ran and lisped, beat her sturdily with fat, bare arms or cuddled to her for kisses. For

with a sudden gesture she stretched out her hands, and cried in a clear voice, "Jean! Jean! It is little Jean!"

* * * * *

It became the fashion—a fashion which lasted half a dozen years at least—to call that Christmas the Martinbault Christmas; so loudly did those who were present at that famous examination, and the discovery which attended it, profess that it exceeded all the other amusements of the year, not excepting even the great ball at the Palais Cardinal, from which every lady carried off an *étrenne* worth a year's pin-money. The story became the rage. Those who had been present drove their friends, who had not been so fortunate, to the verge of madness. From the court the tale spread to the markets. Men made a broadsheet of it, and sold it in the streets—in the Rue Touchet, and under the gallows at Montfaucon, where the body of Solomon Nôtredame withered in the spring rains. Had Madame de Vidoche and the child stayed in Paris, it must have offended their ears ten times a day.

"A MAN, HALF-NAKED, . . . CRAWLED ON TO THE HIGHROAD" (*p.* 212).

But they did not. As soon as madame could be moved, she retired with the boy to the old house four leagues from Perigueux, and there, in the quiet land where the name of Martinbault ranked with the name of the king, she sought to forget her married life. She took her maiden title, and in the boy's breeding, in works of mercy, in a hundred noble and fitting duties entirely to her taste, succeeded in finding peace, and presently happiness. But one thing neither time, nor change, nor in the event love, could erase from her mind; and that was a deep-seated dread of the great city in which she had suffered so much. She never returned to Paris.

About a year after the trial a man with crafty, foxy eyes came wandering through Perigueux, with a monkey on his shoulder. He saw not far from the road—as his evil-star would have it—an old château standing low among trees. The place promised well, and he went to it and began to perform before the servants in the courtyard. Presently the lord of the house, a young boy, came out to see him.

More need not be said, save that an hour later a man, half naked, covered with duck-weed, and aching in every bone, crawled on to the highroad, and went on his way in sadness—with his mouth full of curses; and that for years afterwards a monkey, answering to the name of Taras, teased the dogs, and plucked the ivy, and gambolled at will on the great south terrace at Martinbault.

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